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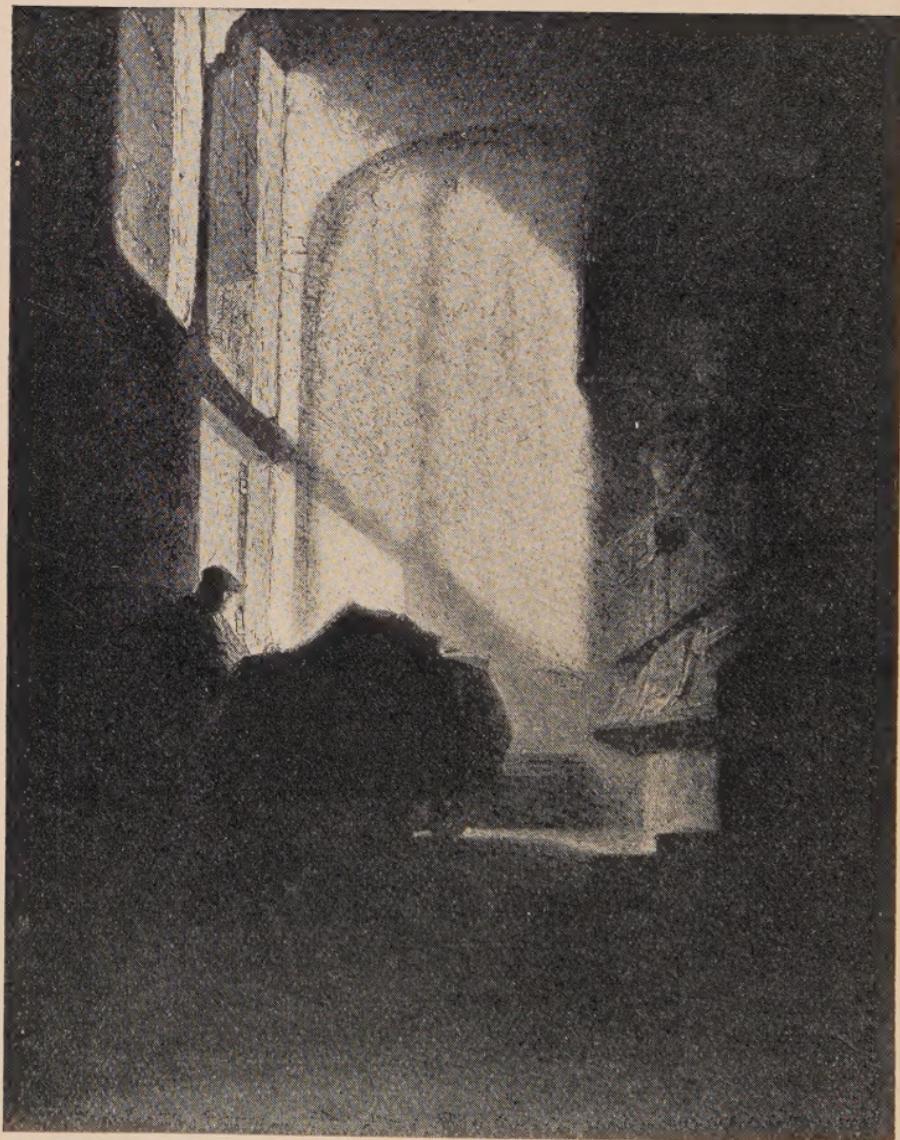
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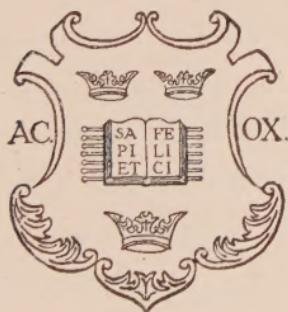
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# ETHICS

*AN HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION*

By

STEPHEN WARD



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LONDON  
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## P R E F A C E

ON one who undertakes to write upon the history of ethics two questions press themselves rather intrusively. The first is, What exactly does he know? The second, What does he wish to impart? Neither question, in the sphere of philosophy, is an idle one. Philosophy is, after all, essentially a wrangle. As compared with history or science, the amount of bare uncoloured fact which it can pass on to the curious is trifling. In a sense the philosopher knows nothing ; he deals with experiments, points of view, contingencies. There are few facts on which all are agreed, and even they yield to different interpretations. Nothing indeed is so meaningless as the summary record of a philosopher's conclusions : without some knowledge of the growth which they had, of the opposition which they met, without, in short, being placed against a background of life, they not only convey nothing ; they are not even true. It is not these that the philosopher knows, or that he would wish to impart.

Yet what else can be imparted? It takes a long time to acquire the philosophic point of view ; the view which can envisage knowledge as a struggle, as an active state ; which comprehends that the value of the struggle is not to be measured by results, but by the extent to which the struggler is truly exercised ; by the consciousness of appren-

ticeship served and some sort of mastery attained. These are the virtues of philosophy ; but they are apparent only to those who have undergone the same training, and reached the same end. And there seems to be small purpose in writing history for those who have already read the material ; yet to write for the rest, who so far as they have not become philosophers must be presumed a little incurious and a little blind, would seem to be more ungrateful still.

The form taken by this book is an attempted response to these difficulties. The meeting-point of the philosophic and the lay mind is a common interest in speculation as a living growth. After all, the history of philosophy is philosophy of a kind, and rather than make his work a catalogue of opinions the author would be wise to preserve this essential feature. It is best to be personal where he cannot pretend to be authoritative ; better to sacrifice completeness than such life as may exist in his own convictions. So far as this book is more personal than it is complete, this must be the excuse. Its author cannot pretend to decide how the great thinkers of the past should affect other people ; but at least he knows how they have affected him.

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I

*Relations of Theory and Practice*

IF philosophers still believe, with Plato, that a philosopher's ethics are better than any others, it is a pardonable vanity. They are not, however, likely to find that others agree with them ; and, on the whole, the others are right. For one reason, morals are not a final and conclusive science ; they reach no end so determinate as to afford firm ground for building. Indeed, it is recognized—and the long history of ethical thought is chiefly responsible for this—that the notions of system, of rigidity, of uniformity, are repugnant to the true spirit of morals. Spiritual endeavour is a constant effort to realize a constant value in the eternal complexities of life. It must change, as life changes, in order to remain the same.

Moreover, ethics in its comprehensiveness cannot be divorced from practice, and while there is some justice in the Socratic contention that to *know* good is to *be* good, the situation is altered if one has to conclude, however regretfully, that the knowledge of good is not so easy to come by, if indeed it is come by at all. Perhaps of the two difficulties, to be good, and to know good, the first is easier. It is at least certain that goodness is more often learnt by example than by precept.

Yet philosophical ethics are not superfluous ; even though some philosophers have had, whether in their lives or discourse, nothing particular to teach. It is true that Rousseau in his own life was not conspicuous for practising those fine sentiments about humanity which he made so popular. It is true also that the Platonic republic does violence to human feelings and virtues which are at least as worthy of preserving as those in the interest of which they are expelled. Rousseau, in short, was something less than a moralist in practice ; Plato something less than a

moralist in theory. Even so, their work has value. Their failures served the cause ; if we got nothing else from their work, we should have discovered that we mean by virtue something more than they meant. They have saved us some mistakes, and it is for this end as much as for truth itself that we philosophize. We must not act like Rousseau ; we must not even be fascinated into thinking like Plato.

The strict inseparability of thought and practice is fairly evident in ethics, but it is a question whether the asserted disinterestedness of thought exists in any sphere ; whether ethics is not the master science. The impulse towards abstract thought is not for abstraction's own sake, but for something much more complex. It is a question of personality rather than of reason. The desire for knowledge is really the desire to know ourselves ; we accumulate wisdom that we may be enlarged. We can only guess with what intention there was displayed on the Delphic temple the motto, 'Know thyself', which Socrates adopted. It was probably no more than a simple prescription for mental health. But, as Socrates discerned, a much deeper truth is underlying. We are only what we know. Knowledge is no abstraction, a separate objective, something of which we are passionless spectators. Knowledge is ourselves ; we are made and changed, heart and soul, mind and body, by what we know. The process is slow, the change small ; but so also is knowledge.

The impulse to intensify and enrich our personality, an impulse which is felt, however obscurely, by the least curious, is also the impulse on account of which we submit ourselves to learn. It is for this reason that we pursue the thought of our predecessors. Their influence over us is twofold. In some sort we are what we are because of their past activities ; and when we come to read their thought they influence us anew. By them we are better enabled to distinguish ourselves to ourselves, to hold the old apart from the new. Doubtless, so far as it does not make the

task of knowledge easier, it is of no special value to read them ; and there are some to whom the knowledge of history appears to add nothing. They are, without effort, themselves. But such persons are equally insusceptible to tradition ; they are not moulded by the silent pressures of the past. Seeing that tradition is as often bad as it is good, they are lucky. But those—and they are most of us—who respond to tradition easily, would be wise not to ignore history, if only as a corrective.

So, while it would be foolish not to admit that there is virtue without philosophy, and philosophy without virtue, there is a kind of perfection in the two together. Perhaps it is no more than a philosopher's itch, but he cannot help postulating a certain harmony between them. But he would agree that virtue stands to lose more by a bad philosophy than it can gain by a good one. Perhaps the most depressing figures in literature are that large class of moralists whose self-imposed duty to virtue is to defend it against vice. They proclaim that in this matter appearances are deceptive ; that on acquaintance virtue will prove to have infinitely greater attractions than vice. They would have been more prudent to conceal their own strangeness to virtue. As though virtue and vice were contending deities ; as though that infinitely austere goddess stooped to attract, or men expected her to. Such writers cry their wares in vain. They are unprofitable to those who know, and by those who do not are not even heard. There are some things a man must learn for himself. If he has not got so far unaided as to know that there is virtue, and nothing else, he must be left with other animals to make of his world what he can ; and, indeed, within his limits he may not do badly. But if he would be virtuous against his will he is a spoiled animal, and so much the more remote from virtue.

To speak of virtue, however, is to some degree misleading. There is no virtue but in a virtuous man. In this fact there is a certain grandeur, and a certain disappointment. It is cause for

pride that virtue is not laid up in heaven, but exists in men, and nowhere else. But, lest pride should be arrogant, it is contrived that no man should know his own goodness. Others can perceive it, but this, if he is to retain it, is just what he must not perceive. His defects he knows, but he is good only for others. In no other activity of mind is there this enforced altruism. The artist can enjoy his own work ; the learned man his learning ; but the enjoyment of our own goodness is denied us all. And just because it is a thing we can enjoy only in another, it is necessary that we should know something about it. To perceive it concretely we must know it abstractly. While we can enjoy good health without knowing what we enjoy, virtue, so far as we do not know it, we shall miss.

And the need for philosophy is all the greater, just because goodness can exist only in the concrete. Were it but an abstract combination of qualities, no great effort would be needed to define it. Because it is concrete and manifold, it escapes definition. We may catalogue the virtues, but this does not enable us to say that a truthful man, or a brave, or an honest, or a loyal, is a good man. Common opinion may be inclined to identify these qualities with goodness, but the fact only reveals the need for some ethical training. True knowledge, indeed, has not only to recognize virtue in strange company, to see goodness in many forms, but to compel itself to a more distasteful task, and admit the deficiencies of its own idols. The one thing fatal to morals is the idea of final perfection.

Without, therefore, infringing on the right—or is it the duty?—of the individual to judge for himself, the philosophy and the history of ethics have a clear function. They assist in that critical process to which the individual must submit before he is in a position to exercise his judgement. If in this matter philosophy is the more direct influence, the history of ethics at least shows him the same process written large ; and in an inquiry of this

kind what has to be unlearnt is as important as what has to be learnt. Though the untutored mind may not find in the study quite what he expected, it will not leave him unprovided. Though his certainty be decreased, his judgement will have been strengthened ; if it has weakened his prejudices, it will have widened his views.

## 2

*The Growth of Ethical Standards*

THE history of morals is a movement from an almost unquestioned uniformity of conduct to an ever-increasing personal responsibility. The days are long past when the writer on morals could interpret the life of primitive races, or the state of nature as it was called, pretty much as it suited him ; and the naïve view that the savage, in contrast with civilized man, lived for better or worse in a state of comparative freedom, is completely exploded. Within the strangely uncertain and incredibly complicated limits of his moral system the savage is bound hand and foot. But the obedience which he gives is quite voluntary, and, so far as he has been untouched by external influences, quite unquestioning. His system is a highly particular code of observances and duties, not derived from general principles, and indeed in no way amenable to considerations of consistency. It is plain that there can be no free speculation, for at the first hint of a question the whole construction would fall to pieces.

Civilized man presents a different case. His code will stand criticism, and he expects to be able to defend it. It is true that custom tends to invest it, or part of it, with a certain sanctity ; it is true also that those periods of history are rare in which perfectly free criticism has been permitted ; even so it does in the main express a logical relation between general principles such as justice, truth, honour, and so forth, and types of action arising out of these. There is always a clear appeal to the mind and the

emotions ; indeed, the artistic embodiment of moral ideals is the most impressive monument which a civilization can leave. Works like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, or the sagas are striking anyhow ; all the more in so far as they represent their creators as they wished to be rather than as they were. Such creations also were and are much more important influences than abstract thought, and art does more to fashion conduct than philosophy.

Moral growth is thus very far from being based on abstract principles. It is a concrete growth like civilization itself. We may define civilization as industry applied with intelligence. Invention breeds skill, and skill breeds power, and power breeds more skill and more invention. But it makes a great deal of difference at what point exactly the development chances to begin ; for that which is once incorporated in the system influences all subsequent growth. Especially is this true of inventions in the sphere of morals ; if, for example, a race conceives such an attitude towards women as is expressed by polygamy and seclusion, and the habits associated therewith, all its future development will be helped or hindered by the customs and outlook thereby established. Doubtless it is possible to be a Turk and a philosopher ; but if we suppose such a man to conclude on theoretical grounds that polygamy is ethically bad, what chance has he of convincing a whole civilization ? Yet even this is more likely than that he should have in the first instance come to an unfavourable conclusion about polygamy. To bring the fable nearer home, it is probable that there is no thinker so free but he is more closely bound than he knows to the ethical notions in which he was brought up.

But, though it must be strictly limited by the past, there will nevertheless be moral growth. Civilization cannot fail to move, because the forces which could keep it stable are just those which enable it to grow. If it stands it dies. The inevitability of this is often forgotten by state-builders of the platonic sort. What man has he cannot remain content with ; and the simplification

of wants, the society of plain living and high thinking, attractive though it be, is an impossibility. Invention must always breed skill, and if the intelligence is such as Plato would approve, it will be reflected in the material structure. Simple wants are crude wants, just as simple tools are bad tools ; a fine intelligence can do its best only in a fine organization. It is mere prejudice to suspect the elaborate because it is elaborate, to suppose that a highly complicated civilization must be in a measure degenerate, that simpler races are hardier stocks. It is, on the contrary, a good deal easier to be a South Sea Islander than a European. It is true that a people can have the forms of civilization without the reality, but this is another matter altogether. Society cannot grow without elaborating.

But the function of ethical speculation is not to assist this growth directly. Once more we come back to the conclusion that the end of ethics is not politics. It is indeed by getting as far away as possible from the practical, by freeing the subject of the distortions due to need, to prejudice, and history, that we can give it its true value. It must raise issues which do not exist until it has raised them, and which it raises purely in the interests of conceptual clarity. And, when this is done, it must expect no more than an indirect influence upon affairs. In the passage of time those abstractions which the philosopher won from chaos with such labour are born again in other minds ; no longer abstractions, but poems, epics, perhaps no more than phrases, yet breathing life and inspiration. In this way men discover that they have something which they never had before, and which they never knew they lacked, and yet without which they could no longer continue. There is no need to tell them to put this new thing into use ; it becomes part of their being. In these matters, when a thing is still subject for argument, it is not yet ripe ; when it is ripe, argument is no longer conceivable. The mystery of spiritual change is that it has come before we are aware.

*The Sophists*

To the question, to whom the rise of abstract ethical speculation is due, a short book can do no more than answer, without subtlety, that it is due to Socrates and his contemporaries. In Socrates, at least, the difference between concept and precept, between exhortation and explanation, is clearly marked ; and so far as that distinction has since been preserved, it is directly or indirectly due to his influence.

It would be interesting, though not very conclusive, to discuss, did space allow, the causes of the new spirit of inquiry. The inexplicable charm of Greek mythology, the impressive dignity of the ethical standards of early Greek literature, provoke the reflection that of all races the Greeks stood to gain least and lose most by bringing their traditions into question. The truth is doubtless that the keenness and refinement of spirit which created Olympus and Achilles, gods that were human and men that were divine, could not be expected to stand still, but had to continue creating even at the cost of destroying. For it must be admitted that free speculation did not by any means invariably produce a Socrates. Whatever the exaggerations of Aristophanes, there is still evidence enough of a strange and wayward baseness, a litigious cynicism, which is politically a good deal more formidable than the artless roguery of an earlier period. Argument seemed liable to produce a kind of intoxication in the Greek. However, to what extent he lost by this we are in no position to estimate ; we are fortunate to know more clearly what we have gained.

Speculation in ethics is considerably later in date than Greek ‘science’. There had been a century or more of theorizing about the physical causes of the universe before interest centred in ethics ; for this the natural conservatism of custom and religion

is doubtless responsible. But one cause of change was perhaps a growing tendency towards an unlocalized and mystical religion, of which Pythagoreanism may serve as an example.

A second cause was the discovery that in a loquacious and intelligent community the occupation of 'sophist' was profitable. These itinerant lecturers, to whom the uses of language have given a worse reputation than they deserve, seem to have chosen for treatment, as lecturers will, subjects of human interest. They were also teachers of eloquence, or the art of persuasion. Their great service to the advancement of speculation came by their making prominent certain paradoxes of knowledge. Paradoxes, not truths ; and no doubt the implications were developed with reference to commercial attractiveness rather than logical consistency. The fact remains, however, that people were set thinking. For good causes as well as bad, some of the now familiar questions began to be canvassed. Is might the sole right? Is statesmanship nothing but the exercise of persuasive tact for selfish ends? Is morality mere convention, and is there no standard more permanent than the changing fancies of man?

It was contended at the time, and has been contended often since, that all sophistical teaching—which of course has not died with the sophists—should be suppressed. The newspaper is the latter-day sophist ; it supplies information and opinions for purposes of gain. And just as the Athenians burnt the books of Protagoras, so, it is argued, should the truth of current affairs be extracted by authority and delivered to the people without disturbing accompaniments. The Athenians, however, were not conspicuously successful in this method of treatment, and the theory itself is fallacious. Apart from any question of the right of one body to impose its ideas on another, or of the possibility of there being such a thing as unalterable truth, the supporters of censorship forget that the power of apprehending truth is the same thing as the power of discerning error. The mind that is

not exercised by oppositions is incapable of receiving any instruction at all. Being denied the bad, it is impervious to the good. Truth is truth only to those who have known falsehood, and if we are deprived of the one we lose the other also. The danger of sophistry lies, now as in Athens, not in its plausibility but in its finding no opposition. The Athenian public was both superstitious and gullible, and its first enthusiasm and later anger sprang alike from a mental outlook warped and fettered by other influences. It was, in short, in just that condition which would be produced by those who should suppress free speculation ; from which it is clear that he who would eradicate sophistry in this manner must himself play the sophist's part.

Among those whose minds were open, and who, as the issue showed, fell for that reason under the same suspicion, the sophists did no more than produce the impressive reaction known to us as Greek philosophy. This, beginning as criticism of sophistical doctrine, quickly attained complete independence. So little indeed had it to fear from its seeming rival, that in a short time the name and trade of sophist had ceased to exist. The credulous mass turned to other superstitions and upon new scapegoats ; while for the next few centuries the life of the philosopher was identified, in common reckoning, with the knowledge and practice of the noblest human virtue.

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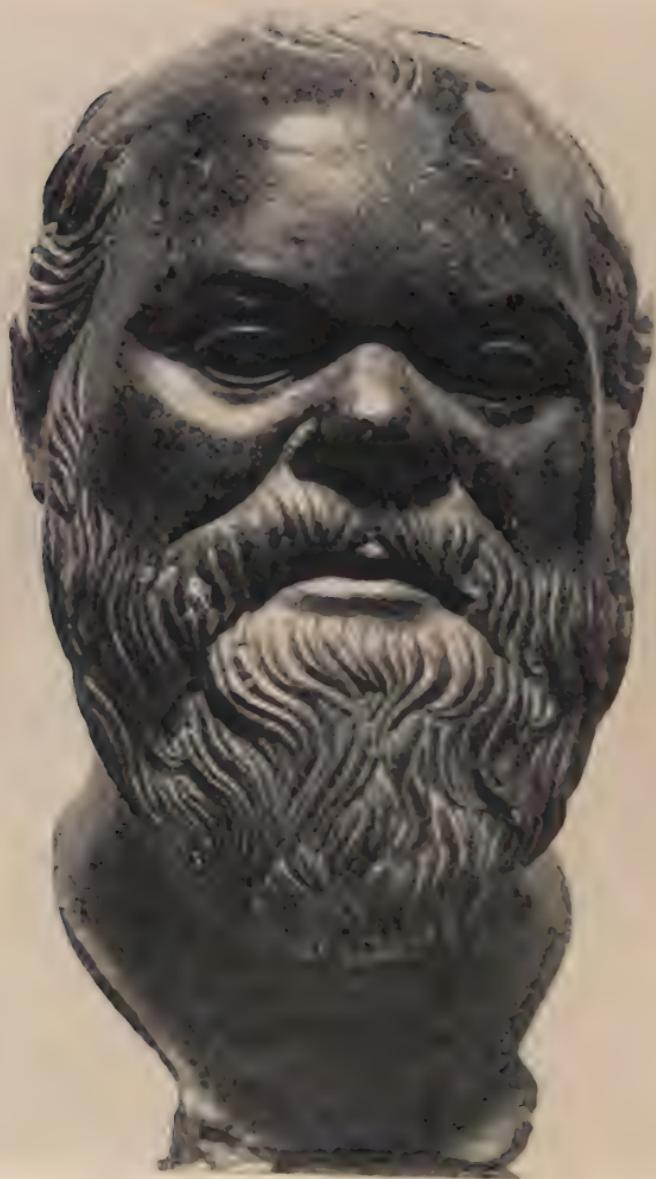
*Socrates, 469–399 B.C.*

THE name of Socrates is almost as familiar to us as to his Athenian contemporaries, and in this there is no more than justice, for the influence of his life and teaching gave the problem of The Good a new implication. So far as the change can be summed up in a word, it is a change from the personal to the abstract. There were good men before Socrates, and theories of goodness also of

a kind ; but Socrates brings to the inquiry at once a greater comprehensiveness and a new emotional force. And as the theory is less personal, so also is the emotion. In Socrates the human study of human good seems to rise above itself and acquire that ‘ character of eternity ’ by which philosophy has ever since been inspired.

In this matter the writings of Xenophon and Plato are in strange accord. Though each interpreted Socrates according to his own intellect and purposes, both pay him that unquestioning homage which only a great man can command, and both, after their lights, reveal much the same sort of man. The secret of his charm would seem to have been a sort of elusiveness or quizzical reserve ; not the irritating reserve of one who wishes not to give himself away, who commits himself to nothing for fear of being proved wrong ; rather of one who has seen more than he is able to express, who, having divined the truth, is willing to wait for the formulation.

But with his mental flexibility Socrates combined an urbane but absolutely inflexible rule of life. Pleasure he neither avoided nor pursued, nor to exhibit his incorruptibility did he require a special setting. For seventy years he lived the life of the ordinary Athenian, wanting nothing, refusing nothing, open to all, the most distinguished and the least conspicuous figure of his age. His integrity finally involved him in the unworthy political struggles of his city ; finding him in the way, those in power brought up against him his long association with their opponents. Socrates was notoriously open to all persons, and, so far as we know, had no political interests. But the excuse was made to serve, and he was accused and condemned to death on the ground of having corrupted the youth of Athens by pernicious teaching. He might have eluded the penalty, but he refused, saying that it was the duty of a good citizen to obey the laws. His submission not only refutes his calumniators, but proves his philosophy ; by what



SOCRATES

The Munich Head

he had lived he was prepared to die. There are no men so immortal as these.

His teaching is not so much a doctrine as a method. His friends were accustomed to say that a little ‘conversation’ with him left one numb. By a few genial questions he withered inconsistencies ; professing always with bland irony that he had no views of his own. This is no pose. Socrates was fully seized of two teaching truths, that only by his own efforts can a man arrive at knowledge, and that of whatever knowledge he believes himself to possess ignorance composes the greater part. Only half-jokingly did he interpret the Oracle, that Socrates was the wisest man, to mean that he at least knew that he did not know. Consciousness of ignorance was for him the first step in the knowledge of self, and knowledge of self the indispensable preliminary to any other. Knowledge he valued primarily for its effect on the knower ; it was the sole road to virtue. The converse of this, that virtue is the sole road to knowledge, is implied in his teaching. There is a symmetrical progression between both sides, to the virtuous man new knowledge being opened, and so, again, new virtue. The union of the two is Wisdom. It is this persistent association of two lines of development which makes it possible for orders like the Cyrenaics or Cynics, mainly devoted to a rule of life, not less than the brilliantly speculative school of Plato, to claim him as their founder.

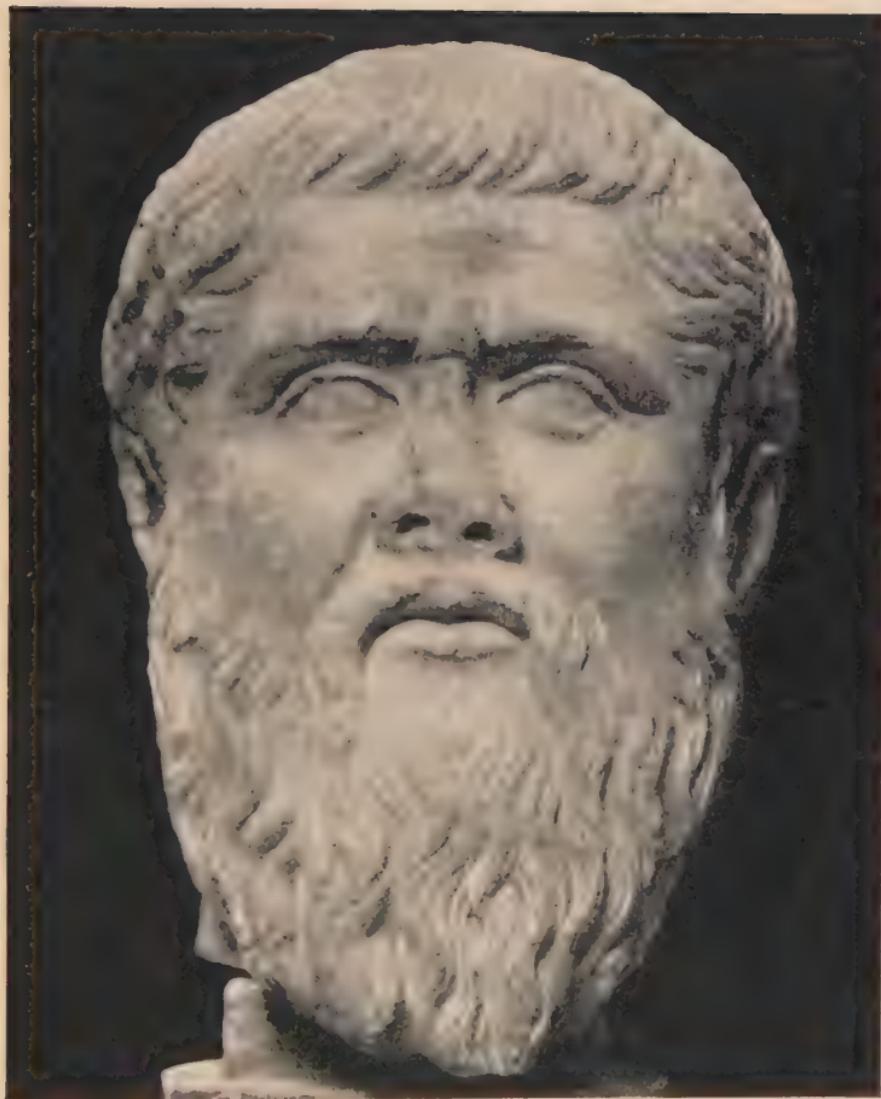
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*Plato, 429–347 B.C.*

ARISTOTLE describes Socrates as the first to seek for universals in the sphere of morals. Plato in his *Republic* depicts him in the act of developing this inquiry. That behind all the illusory shapes which mock mankind with the vision of goodness some true and abiding form existed, there can be no doubt Socrates believed ;

but whether the views of the *Republic* are those of Socrates or of Plato must always be a matter of dispute. Plato, most ardent and devoted of disciples, though throughout his earlier works he makes Socrates his mouthpiece, and plays no part himself, is a different man from his teacher. The one is simple and homely in manner and speech ; the other is a poet and master of style. The one is a sculptor who does not ply his trade, and lives on a few pence a day ; the other is wealthy and well-born. To the one the pride of birth or learning is nothing. He lives in close and mystical communion with an inner voice to the guidance of which he has surrendered himself. The other is learned and a believer in learning, a writer of books, strongly tinged with aristocratic and intellectual exclusiveness. It is clear that such a man, with the best intentions, might not always be a faithful interpreter of his master ; and the *Republic* contains too many of the prejudices of a fifth-century Athenian patrician to be easily accepted as Socratic doctrine.

It will, perhaps, be allowed that the *Republic* contains a smaller proportion of the typical merits of the Platonic philosophy, and it is unfortunate that, by a twist of the educational curriculum, it is the one work of Plato which is at all generally read to-day. It is a work of many excellences, and will always appeal strongly to a certain emotional type, but it lacks that supreme quality which belongs to the highest philosophical work, that it must be taken unreservedly in earnest. The tacit refusal of European lovers of the *Republic* to do so is very notable. They applaud Plato's seriousness, his argumentative force, his acute analysis, his literary charm—superfluously perhaps, for no one would deny them. But they do not do what Plato intended, and adopt the work as the only possible basis for political reform. Nor is this surprising ; for though there are many admirable features, its fundamental principles are absolutely repugnant to us, and express more significantly, perhaps, than anything else, the radical



## PLATO

The Aix-en-Provence head (Bruckmann, A.-G., Munich)

opposition between the Hellenic and the European civilizations. The fundamental principles are these ; a rigid inter-related code of law and morals imposed by the actual rulers, an economic system based on the complete subjection of the hand-workers and money-makers, and the total suppression of all artistic activity save as it served to convey moral lessons. Now it is clear that, so far as European history can be summed up in a few words, it may be said to be a struggle against all these principles ; and if these are the price to be paid for the virtues of the philosopher king, then it is manifest that no European would pay it. The attempt to soften or adapt Platonic doctrine by glozing these fundamentals (which Plato in the main reproduced in his *Laws*) is more pardonable in itself than in the tendency it has encouraged of a certain unreality, vanity even, in philosophical politics. With some justice we can trace that unprofitable phantasm, the State, with its shadowy claims and functions, back to Plato and his less discriminating followers, and their fallacious assumption that a state can be discussed apart from its history.

But there is more in Plato than a correct or incorrect theory. Nowhere but in his works can there be found so rich an expression either of the qualities which impel man to philosophy or of the hopes which he thinks to fulfil by it ; and this record of spiritual endeavour is the true Platonic ethics. The term Idealism is the common classification of his views, but the use of years has degenerated its meaning, nor is it always properly applied. There is, indeed, a sense in which Realist is to-day a far more accurate description for him. He was realist in his absolute and unremitting exclusion of everything that was unreal ; and this meant everything in man's experience but a part of himself which, insignificant to begin with, was capable by strenuous and ceaseless exercise of revealing the insignificance of all else. This part one might, with Plato, call reason ; but he found the term inadequate. The disciple of reason has, as part of his reward, the power to

discern error, but the real reward of his devotion is to find himself, through reason, brought into veritable communion with the creative essence of all things, which is as much Goodness as it is Truth. This is the philosopher's moment, which is not, not even perhaps for Plato, adequately represented by the world of Ideas or Forms in which he embodied it. Such intellectualist constructions are inevitable, but they are to be valued most for the moment, call it ecstasy or realization, which gave them birth.

To this side of Plato are to be traced the mystical developments of Neoplatonism and the fascination he has had for some Christian thinkers ; and his ascetic doctrine establishes a line of profound ethical importance. Exercise only (*askesis*) can produce results in this sphere ; and this not merely in the formation of good habits, where its value is commonly acknowledged, but in the very marrow of human nature. Effort, intense effort, is the sole condition upon which man develops the potentialities of his being. The statement is merely empirical, for what effort is or why it should be necessary we know no more now than we ever did. But its effects, described merely in terms of common experience, are significant enough. It is not merely that we triumph over the obstacle which called the effort forth ; nor is it a prelude to a state of rest. It is rather the consciousness of the acquisition of new powers and of a new field for their exercise, a field into which we would not have entered, and, in a sense, would have had no need to enter but for the effort which we made. Not only so but, as Plato put it, the way back is almost impossible ; we cannot even if we wished re-enter the old world or take it upon the old terms. Plato was considering the matter from the point of view of the development of the individual spirit, but modern biology shows the same thing written large in the development of the race. What have we in common with Pithecanthropus, our grandfather ? Could we see the world in his terms, or he in ours ? Did we exchange places, both would die ; so changed is

our world by reason of his efforts and those of his descendants begotten by him.

Plato, like all of us, did not realize the implications of his own inspiration. While comprehending that the real value of thought lay in its radical transformation of the thinker, in his state-making he proceeds as if human nature were permanent and unalterable. Similarly much modern thought worries itself with problems which are only problems on the assumption that human nature is unalterable. If it were so, it would follow that the problems are insoluble. What, for example, is to be made of the belief that any perfect state must embody cast-iron safeguards against the exploitation of man by man? Is it not better to realize that the condition desired is one in which such a contingency is incapable of being thought, and therefore unnecessary to provide for; that the uneasy conscience of such exploitation is the first stage in a spiritual growth which will ultimately render such exploitation impossible; and that the true point of endeavour is to disseminate and intensify that uneasiness by all the arts of persuasion? Too often it is, by a strange perversity, assumed that the nationalization of industry, for example, offers a real security against the predatory instincts of man, and is at the same time essential in a non-predatory community; the truth being that in the one case it assures nothing and in the other would not be required.

## 6

*Aristotle, 384-322 B.C.*

PLATO and Aristotle provide an almost complete contrast of temperament and an almost complete similarity of ideals. Aristotle is of the true type of scholars, not only in his library, but in his interest in the whole range of learning and the caution bred by his familiarity with detail. He is scholar also in his easy disregard of merely contentious matter. Plato had offered to



## ARISTOTLE

From the head in the HOFMUSEUM, VIENNA [Missing]

prove that Justice was choice-worthy even at the cost of disgrace and death ; his proof, however, could convince only those already like-minded with himself. Aristotle is more summary. Goodness being the affair of reason, the only opinion worth considering is that of reasonable men : they will think alike, and the others do not matter, since to urge reasons against the unreasonable is obviously vain. But while making virtue, like Plato, the privilege of reason alone, he is far more tender to human nature in its other aspects. There is a second class of virtue, based on traditions crystallized in the community under the guidance of good men in which all ordinary persons may have a share. This is his well-known Rule of the Mean, a highly ingenious system by which uniformity and flexibility in the sphere of conduct are secured simultaneously. Good training, that is a training bound to the principles which good men of the first class have recognized to be necessary, will enable a man to take a course which on the whole —due regard being paid to special circumstances—will lie midway between two extremes.

The detailed development of the rule affords some interesting contrasts between the Greek and the modern point of view ; the extremes, that is, are differently determined by the ‘ practical wisdom ’ of the two peoples. But it is the merit of the Aristotelian system that it is not invalidated by the change : the formula of the mean is applicable with very little modification to the code which rules our daily give-and-take relations, and probably, indeed, to any conceivable code ; and Aristotle must have the credit of first stating it. The same good sense marks his political speculations. Like Plato’s, they are based on the city state, but are applicable to very different types of community, for, once more, his formula ‘ not life only, but a prosperous life ’, embraces them all. He grasps that politics are concerned mainly with ordinary folk, and that the philosopher, who is a self-sufficing creature, enters only so far as to provide such with a defence against their

own shortcomings. He dogmatizes only in a tedious discussion, imitated from Plato, on the relative merits of monarchical, oligarchical, and democratic constitutions. Such discussion may have had contemporary value in making men reflect on the influences which may be traced to typical forms of government, but on later and less original speculation the effect was harmful. It began a series of vain and half-rhetorical essays in which specific virtues and faults were attached to each form, and which appeared to justify the inference that, wherever the nominal form existed, these faults or virtues were to be found. Such absurd and monstrous growths as the Romanization of the French constitution after the Revolution are due to the vain belief that the form will create the spirit ; and it cannot be said that political speculation is yet free of this error.

Aristotle has been criticized for ignoring the apparent significance of the Macedonian Empire, and for his acquiescence in the slave system. The empire, however, signified nothing to the philosopher ; a robber state had no point in common with the intelligent self-organization postulated by him as the basis of a community, and it was not till three hundred years later that the Romans, after gross failures, demonstrated the possibility of organization on an imperial scale. As for slavery, the tone of his treatment is one of uneasy defence. The truth is that he was here faced with inexpugnable fact. The whole of classical civilization was based on slavery, and no single circumstance did more to bring it to ultimate ruin, and, since criticism was always increasingly adverse, it would seem that nothing less than break-up could have sufficed to remove it. To contemplate any change so radical was confessedly beyond the scope of Aristotle's politics.

## *Historical Influences on Greek Ethics*

AFTER Aristotle there is no further attempt to base ethics on the traditional type of Greek political community, and the reasons for this must be considered. No doubt they are in part due to the compulsory limitations of the city state's external freedom by the new territorial powers, but the main cause is more probably a recognition that the natural ethical unit is humanity as such, and that political or geographical conditions are but accidents. Thus the cleavage between ethics and politics becomes almost complete, and has so remained.

The new period is supposed to mark a decline of intellectual not less than political vigour ; but this is a far less simple matter to decide than it seems. That conception of a Greek dominion, which Alexander may be said to have established, and which ultimately, after many vicissitudes, became the Byzantine Empire, and survived everything but the attacks, in the early thirteenth century, of the brutal but extremely vigorous new European civilization, cannot be said to have lacked vitality. Its structure certainly resisted the canker of slavery for a longer time than the city state. The increase in wealth and complexity, which enabled the Greek genius to express itself, at the same time destroyed the forms under which it had grown. The increase implied an increased slave population, with the accentuation of all those difficulties inherent in the relations of a superior with an inferior race. The kinds of work which it was degrading for a free man to touch rapidly multiplied, until they included almost all handiwork. The freemen thus imperceptibly deprived of their living still exercised political power, with the consequence that on one pretext or another they were supported out of state funds, and government lost all principle. Nothing, it would seem, but

despotical methods could restore this, and the city state was destroyed by its very efforts after expansion.

The same influence affected intellectual life also. For what modern Europe has come to know as science, that is, the ingenious extension of our control over nature, the first requisite is a considerable degree of craftsmanship. The instruments by which science is advanced are the work of the highest manual skill. In Greece, however, all manual skill was in the possession of slaves, and invincible prejudice withheld the philosopher or any other intellectual from acquiring any. The effect on Greek learning was peculiar. Such learning as could be pursued without loss of dignity, mathematics, for example, or geography, continued to progress until the general extinction of intellectual life; but physics and chemistry, which depend upon skill of hand, remain on the whole empirical and undeveloped.

Thus, so far as any single answer suffices to explain why Greek political organization was so unstable and why their intellectual genius did not develop upon the lines with which we are familiar to-day, that answer seems to be Slavery. That apart from this circumstance there was any intrinsic mental deterioration is hard to see. The condition was one of stagnation rather than decline. Greek philosophy had already raised, in one way or another, all the problems which the existing state of knowledge contained; advance could only come, as modern philosophy advances, from the discovery of new and puzzling facts, and such discovery was lacking. Nothing is more regrettable, for if in Greece skill of hand had been joined to skill of head, we should have been saved the Dark Ages, and modern Europe would have gained a thousand years for the solution of its own problems. As it is, the sole merit of that period is that at the end of it slavery as the basis of society is extinct.

*Stoicism and Epicureanism, c. 340-270 B.C.*

STOICISM and Epicureanism, practically contemporary doctrines, have many points in common. Both regard political society as a secondary and almost irrelevant condition, but Epicurus makes the ethical starting-point the individual, while Zeno begins rather with the species. A tacit reservation common to both is that the disciple must be a person of intelligence ; in this they show their Socratic origin. Stoicism, however, was capable of becoming a creed, and thus found considerable favour with the Romans ; unintelligent Epicureanism was scarcely to be distinguished from pure self-indulgence, and the Romans naturally despised the doctrine they spoiled. It is none the less a system of considerable originality.

Epicurus, probably because of the teaching of Democritus, is the first to contemplate man in the light of the vast and immortal cosmic forces with which he is surrounded ; but, far from being depressed by the contrast, he makes the prospect of personal extinction the solid foundation of happiness. The fortuitous interplay of atoms in motion has brought man into being ; a similar idle chance will sweep him away. He must meet the issue with tranquillity, and in tranquillity he will find happiness. Life's furies, love, hunger, ambition, and the like, are but the delusion of his condition. The sole external source of happiness is friendship as a means of consolidating inner contentment. The friendships of this sect were proverbial.

Epicurus probably startled his contemporaries most by asserting that the gods did not exist for men, and that virtue was not a good in itself. The host of heaven was to him a self-invented nightmare, and he conceived that he was doing real service to mankind by pointing out that the power of these phantoms depended solely

upon the extent to which they were believed in. And, dangerous though it might be, it was right to insist that virtue was a creation of man for man, regardless of the heavens; for the soul alone matters, even if transitory, still more if immortal. His system was at least free of the danger of code morality, pharisaism, and was not, at its best, inferior in kindliness and fortitude to any. Where it unquestionably failed was in giving any stimulus to civic<sup>1</sup> virtues. Nationalism was for him an evil. But in this he merely anticipates early Christian doctrine.

One may contrast Stoicism with its rival in many ways, yet there is a curious similarity in its main conclusions. Like the other, it begins by measuring man against the universe, and draws no very hopeful inferences. At intervals the universe was to be consumed by fire, after which the Reason innate in it would proceed to construct another, identical to the minutest detail of history. This Reason was as regardless of man as chance itself, and man could do no more than save himself useless repinings by identifying himself with its laws.

The real difference is a practical one. It was impossible to be an Epicurean without more or less withdrawing from the world, but a Stoic could apply his principles to the world as he found it. What the Epicurean secured by resignation the Stoic grasped by a more positive act of will. The world was his onion; with himself inside, the purposes and principles which wrought in it enfolded him layer upon layer, and he could believe, if he chose, that the cause of his being was also the cause of the whole. To understand this was to be free at once from error and from pain; for ignorance alone would oppose destiny. Manifestly such a creed was well suited for harsh and unsubtle natures, and it is probable that up to the Christian era it was professed by most Romans of the governing class. In this manner it suffered additions and developments which are not always theoretically consistent.

Strictly speaking, virtue was the life of a wise man, and as there had never been a man wholly wise there had been no absolute virtue. In practice, the asserted ‘indifference’ of all external conditions gave place to the recognition of certain types of conduct as virtuous or as promoting virtue. Thus a Stoic could be a good father, soldier, or citizen without troubling himself over finer points, only calling upon his convictions for strength in misfortune or courage against obstacles. This homely philosophy, ruminated for generations by sincere and simple minds, produced a body of reflections which might still serve as a breviary, and which was largely incorporated in Christian manuals. Perhaps the most finished exposition is found in the letters of Seneca, who took his texts from Epicurus as well as from his own school. It may be summed up in the words, ‘True happiness is a hard thing.’

The Stoic doctrine of law in nature had a beneficial effect on the development of Roman law, but it is misleading to stress this. Stoicism, like any true system of ethics, really begins where law ends; it is concerned with the ultimate needs and cravings of the soul apart from the tissue of circumstance. A curious example of this is in the matter of suicide, which the Stoic permitted and even, in certain contingencies, enjoined. How it was proper thus to defy the purpose of nature is not easy to see, on Stoic principles, but clearly such permission goes beyond anything which law, as the coercive and cohesive basis of society, could allow. And, in estimating Stoicism, its vision of a human society limited only by the species has to be set against a brutal and egotistical arrogance which it at times exhibited, and which its tenets could be made to justify.

*Mediaevalism*

THE study of Greek ethics makes it clear that over a very considerable period of time a large number of people honestly devoted themselves to the task of living rightly by the aid of reason. Few indeed are the Greek philosophers known to us by their works ; but there survive the names of hundreds, spread throughout the Greek world in cities large and small, who maintained the tradition. In that small and inquisitive world the philosopher was expected to be an example in living and dying, and the books are full of stories to show that he was so. In the historical records of Greek frivolities and Roman excesses it is natural that these uneventful activities should find no mention, but we are inclined in consequence to draw rather a false picture of the pre-Christian era. Yet it is from this period that there derives the still existing literary identification of philosophy and virtue.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Christian converts among the classical peoples largely regarded themselves as a new philosophic sect, better than their predecessors, but none the less in close connexion. Justin Martyr indignantly asks the Emperor Aurelius why they do not receive the same consideration ; and he regards the books of heathen wisdom as inferior, not in nature, but because they were borrowed under the inspiration of devils from the sacred writings of the Hebrews.

The difference was, in fact, greater than the resemblance, and the time came when the Christians expressed an ever-increasing hostility to the philosophic schools, which symbolized the last strongholds of Paganism. Early in the sixth century those at Athens were suppressed by Justinian. But there can be no doubt that in its earlier days the new religion was assisted among educated Greeks and Romans by their familiarity with the notion of a way of life regulated by an ideal.

What new principles were introduced by Christianity requires a complicated answer. In one sense all goes on as before. The idea of personal communion with God, and the seeking for Him as the sole end of man, was developed quite independently of Christianity in the Neoplatonist school of Plotinus and Proclus. The idea of election, and of the preservation of contact with the divine by means of ceremonies, is present in many esoteric religions of the Mediterranean world. No Christian principle but has an echo in some other system, so that, considered in its parts, the difference between Christianity and its rivals seems small. Two things, however, combine to give it, as a whole, a totally new character.

First of these is its claim to universality, the idea of man in all his activities subordinated to God ; not in the Stoic sense in which the individual ascertains, by the light of his reason, his due place in the scheme of things, but by a more peremptory method—that of revelation. God has ceased to be a principle and become a person, holding direct communication with man. The second follows out of the first, namely, the disparagement of reason as an instrument for determining human good. Whatever else of its Jewish ancestry Christianity discarded, these two Jewish conceptions remained ; and whatever Greek speculation or Greek habits of thought Christianity claims to have incorporated has an unfamiliar appearance because of this limitation. Henceforth, the proper task of reason is to interpret revelation, and in this way a literary type of a new kind is created in the shape of a commentary on holy writ, the form in which practically all Christian literature exists.

It is true that with the slow revival of civilization at the end of the first millennium hopes were now and again entertained of a way by which revelation might be reconciled with reason. But the movement concerned a few individuals only, and happened to coincide with the vigorous and successful effort of the bishops of Rome to extend and organize their authority. These soon

discovered that speculation was a very dangerous thing, and instituted a censorship. It is not always sufficiently remembered that even the 'doctors of the Church' did not enjoy their present veneration during their lifetime; their teaching was accepted only by slow and hesitating stages. Not until the papal authority itself was attacked could the claims of independent thought be resumed. It is this inexpugnable fact which makes it so difficult to treat of Christian ethics from the same point of view as ancient or modern speculation.

Mediaeval ethics, on the theoretical side, is little more than the development of casuistry; a kind of jurisprudence *in foro conscientiae*. Inasmuch as the general principles of virtue were permanently laid down, no other development was possible than to extend their application to particular cases, and to classify conduct according to its merit or sinfulness. Protests against such formalism, whether in the name of mysticism or of liberty of conscience, are insignificant. The spiritual director was supreme, and the individual was a helpless and, to some extent, a willing victim to a power which even kings gainsaid at their peril.

It is natural to inquire whether, in the sphere of practice, mediaevalism gained advantages to balance the loss of freedom. It is not easy to assert that it did, without suspicion of prejudice. The student of character does not find in the Middle Ages a greater proportion of moral excellence; nor, of course, does he find a less. Human nature shows its customary uniformity. The two institutions which are often regarded as the special moral characteristic of this period, the universal Church and monasticism, do not survive any very searching criticism. The agreement imposed by the Church will not compare either in quantity or quality with the agreement reached on ultimate moral issues by the ordinary processes of free thought. As for monasticism, its hey-day, if there was one, was in the Dark Ages; during this period its history is a tale of slowly decreasing reputation, within

and without, in spite of frequent purgings. Its virtues came primarily from the individual, not from the system.

There is, in fact, good reason for the tendency of ethical historians to treat mediaevalism as a case apart. So many of its issues have importance only in its own peculiar atmosphere; and so many are painfully repugnant. A constant current of persecution of steadily increasing intensity dissipates, for some souls, the glamour of a remarkable age. Cruel men will be found at all times; but to parallel the cruelty of the mediaeval system one must leave civilization and go to the savages. Only there are to be found similar dispassionate massacres, tortures, and burnings for some jot or tittle of some unintelligible law. For those who can ignore this aspect mediaevalism has its peculiar charm, a charm which extends to its philosophy. In acumen, in argumentative subtlety, in deductive power, it is inferior to none. Its great difference is, to some, a matter of small account; the difference, namely, that the mind is under no necessity to accept its premisses.

It left one strange legacy to moral philosophy—a problem which is no problem—the ‘problem of free will’. Whether a man had it really in his power to choose between right and wrong was a question which never troubled the Greeks. The fact of choice in man was obvious, and only because of it could any questions of conduct arise. There is a passage in Aristotle’s *Ethics* which does envisage the speculative difficulty involved in human choice, and it is asked how virtue can be regarded as more voluntary than vice, seeing that a propensity to either might be something beyond control, and that no one can learn more than his natural abilities permit. The difficulty is a genuine one, and no real ethics can be propounded without solving it. But Aristotle points out that the difference between voluntary and involuntary action still remains. The fact of choice, that is, remains; the objection shows no more than that we do not understand how it should be so.

But it was not in this way that the question forced itself on

Christian philosophy ; it came by way of revelation. God had revealed to man that he had made the world and all in it ; also that by an act of sin man had lost the favour which he originally possessed. The question naturally arose how it was that God, the maker of all, was not responsible for man's sin ; and the question is plainly insoluble. The keen intellect of Augustine had decided, in the fifth century, that in his inscrutable purposes God had predestined certain souls to sin, but the more general mediaeval view was that man was responsible for his own misdoing because he was endowed with free will. How difficult this was to understand, the extensive literature on the subject sufficiently indicates. But the difficulty is quite irrational, for it only arises on the assumption that the relationship between God and man is as stated, and there is, in point of fact, no rational necessity for thinking so.

## IO

*The Transition to Modern Times*

THE history of modern ethics consists, in brief, of exposing the fallacies inherent in the revelational theory of ethics, and of the attempt to substitute, by no means always successfully, a more satisfactory foundation. The movement encountered great difficulties, for as a consequence of the religious quarrels which marked the opening of the period, free speculation, of whatever sort, lay under the gravest suspicion, and a man who professed it took his life in his hand. Only little by little were the essentials of the problem laid bare, nor has their comprehension proved an easy matter. On whatever theory ethics may be based, the consequences in the sphere of conduct are always much the same, so that there is a tendency to regard speculation as barren. Public intelligence, so well educated in many respects, appears to have in this only the vaguest notion of the implications of its own prejudices, and even while it rightly regards it as not a subject

on which it can passively accept teaching, at the same time it is unwilling to acquaint itself with the difficulties. For this the unfortunate association of ethics with denominational religion is largely responsible, together with the vast desert of controversy which in the past four centuries has marked the effort of ethical thought to reconstitute its independence. Of all this material only a small fraction possesses that impartiality which gives a permanent value.

Hobbes, Spinoza, and Kant are perhaps the three authors whose strictly rationalist investigations into ethics have laid bare the elements of the subject. Of them it can be said that their mistakes are as illuminating as their successes. Each in his own way develops consequences of which, grounded as they are in the roots of the subject, account must always be taken. Other writers have done much more than these (who are indeed scarcely more than names to the general public) to stimulate general interest and reflection ; notable names are those of Montaigne, Swift, Johnson, Voltaire, or his modern successor, Bernard Shaw. Such writers mount other weapons than mere logical cogency, and their aim is more practical ; they are significant for their ability to express the heightened ethical sensitiveness latent in their contemporaries. Thinkers of this type the world could not spare and will never be without, but it is the merely critical examination of first principles which is the first business of ethics, and this alone in the last resort gives the power neither to ignore nor to be deceived by any practical message. Mankind is apt to waver between a too extravagant welcome and a too extravagant scorn of the new prophet, who deserves neither. The attitude is the survival of the mediaeval belief in authority ; we reject the new, because it opposes the old authority ; or we hail it, because it is the new authority. In this at least modern ethics go straight back to the Greek ; there is no authority save that of reason. We accept only what we understand. For those who

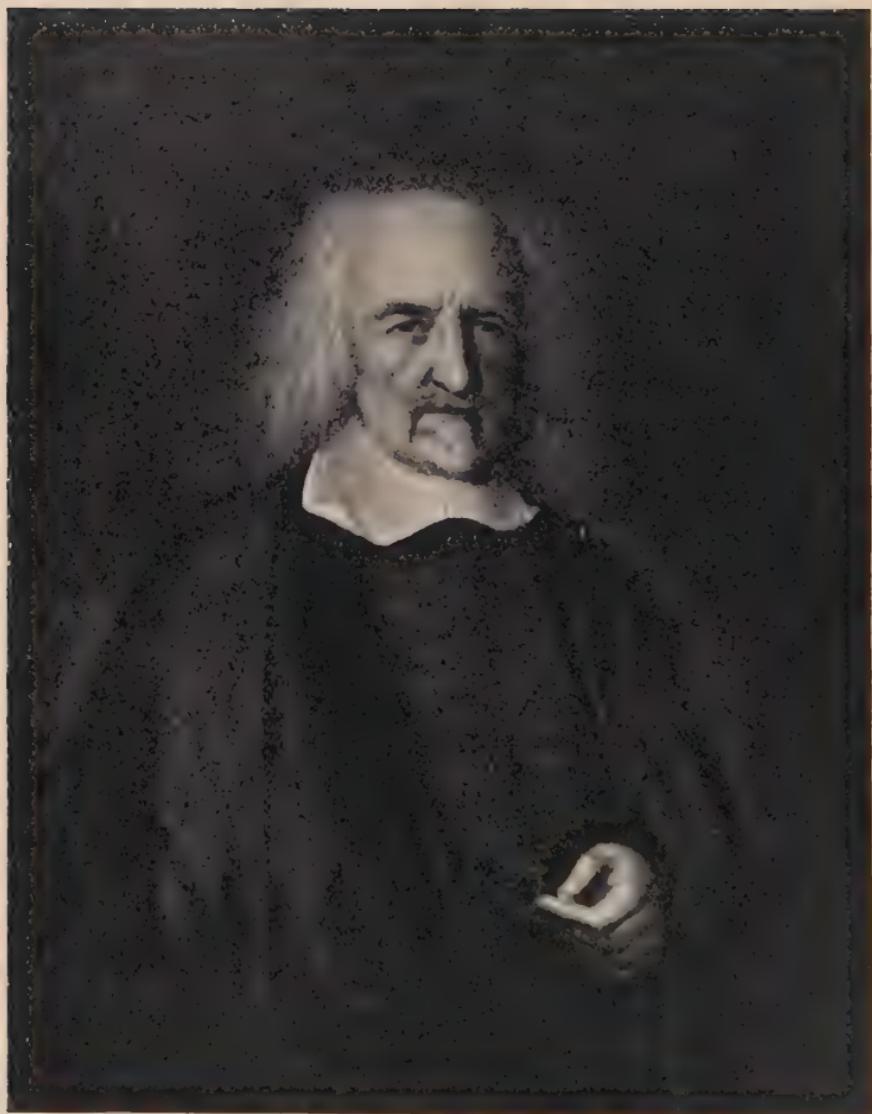
apprehend from this a mere chaos of contention the old answer stands : ‘ there are many forms of error, but truth is single.’ It may also be added that the ways in which mankind can alter his course of life are singularly limited ; his courses are more restricted than he cares to admit. Did he turn the world upside down, he would effect no more than to find at the bottom what he formerly found at the top ; no very great change.

## II

*Hobbes, 1588–1679*

HOBSES possesses that true philosophic merit which is dependent far less upon correctness of views than upon the willingness and ability to argue consistently and without prejudice from any given principles. He, Spinoza, and Kant may be said to be the only moralists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who argue their subject first on rational grounds before, and not after, accommodating it to their private views. This is what gives to Hobbes’s utilitarianism, as this type of ethical theory came to be called, a value which in all other utilitarianism is painfully lacking. He alone is not frightened of the consequences which it is at once seen to involve.

Utilitarianism is the attempt to reduce all conduct to the principle of pure selfishness, but very few of its exponents have found themselves strong enough to accept the invidious implications of that word ; yet as a phase in the history of thought the theory admits of a very strong defence. The weak point of any authoritarian system of ethics is that all authority, however august, is capable of being called in question. It is the product of consent, and it disappears if the consent is withdrawn. Any attempt to establish authority must begin, therefore, with an investigation of the nature of consent. Is there any ultimate tribunal from which no appeal can be made ?



## HOBES

The National Portrait Gallery (Emery Walker)

Hobbes, whose dislike of fighting brought upon him the suspicion of cowardice, did not shrink from an inquiry which exposed him to dangers greater than those run by the average soldier. A pungent and witty controversialist, who did not hesitate to make a fool of himself—and in the sphere of mathematics he certainly did—he knew well how to draw from comparatively innocuous principles the most distasteful conclusions. Whether in a peaceful atmosphere he would have been as blind to certain shortcomings in his doctrine as he professed to be is a doubtful matter ; but our debt to Hobbes is not in the sphere of doctrine alone. There can be small question that among the many influences which contributed to make eighteenth-century England a comparatively tolerant country his hard hitting and combative example must be counted.

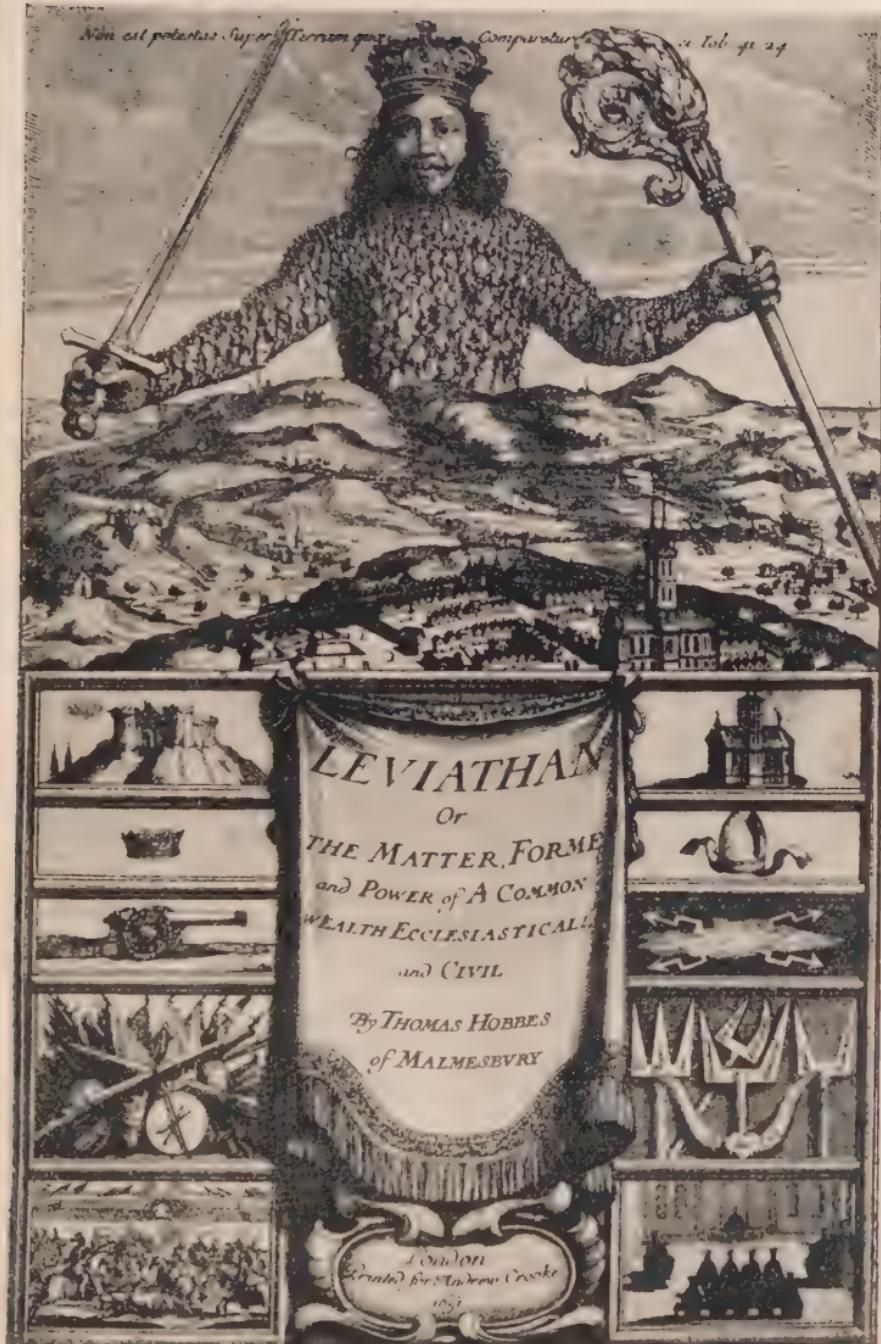
Hobbes in France was immensely attracted by the confidence of the Cartesians that the interpretation of nature hung upon the advancement of mathematics ; he conceived the notion of applying this method to the study of society. But Hobbes had no qualifications, even if the subject was open to such treatment, and beyond some talk of bodies and motions in the opening book of the *Leviathan* mathematics play no part, unless it were to convince the author of the wisdom of ‘not multiplying entities beyond necessity’. The bodies of men are conceived as moved always by one simple force, the need to preserve their own existence. They were of their nature doomed to a primal enmity, since they were incapable of entertaining any idea but their own interest, and any concerted or co-operative action could only arise as a special case of self-interest. Such a situation arises so soon as individuals discover that the advantages of complete liberty of action are cancelled by the equal liberties of every one else, and that to retain these liberties unchecked is to nullify the end for which they were implanted. Thus nature’s law of self-preservation is only realized when the individuals agree to surrender their

liberties to a person or persons, who shall henceforward lay down the conditions of their intercourse.

So for Hobbes society and all ethical relations were the result of natural forces, their appearance implying nothing external or miraculous. The astonishment produced among his contemporaries can only be understood by remembering that all, reformers and counter-reformers alike, believed that Europe was a hierarchy created in its essential outlines by God. Men might argue about the precise relations of kings to their peoples, or priests to their congregations, without doubting the divine origin of both these institutions ; but here was a theory which, for all that it left unsaid, could envisage society without either of these appendages. Indeed, the earliest political use made of the *Leviathan* was to justify Cromwell's commonwealth. Such applications are, however, trivial ; its real work was to recover for free speculation a field of thought long denied it.

That there was a good deal more in morals than the new theory allowed for was quickly manifest. It was right to urge that society is not made by an act of arbitrary authority ; it was plainly wrong to argue that because the distinction between good and bad had, on the hierarchic theory, been created at the same time, it was a false distinction because the theory was false. Nothing is less convincing than Hobbes's assertion that good and bad are identical terms with legal and illegal, that the act which constitutes society constitutes also its moral standards. Even though he makes 'Do as you would be done by' a principle involved in that natural development by which man passes from the state of nature to that of citizen subordinate to a sovereign whose function it is to realize that principle, he still remains blind to the difference between prudence and virtue which the ascetic wisdom of the Middle Ages had made common property. Was the love of man only another word for caution, or the ultimate perfection after which man so mysteriously yearned no more than a trim little

*Non est potestas super terram quae contra te* *Conqueratur.* *Eccl. Tob. 10. 29.*



monarchy in which, whatever one got, no one at least got more? Plainly, if this was all utilitarianism could offer, God stood in no great danger; and it would be wiser with Pascal to despise human intellect than to glory with Hobbes in so pitiful a triumph.

## 12

*Political Conditions of the New Movement*

THE endeavour to assimilate or reject Hobbism is the keynote of all subsequent thought for at least a century. Arising as it did side by side with the effort to understand material processes on purely naturalist hypotheses, it was too congenial to the spirit of the time not to exercise a powerful influence. Even so, ethics was still a long way from winning its independence; the whole issue was too closely bound up with political conditions. Liberty of conscience and political liberty were recognized as distinct questions only by slow degrees, and it was even longer before it was permissible openly to distinguish between ethics and religion. In England, however, the religious settlement had removed the worst features of the old ecclesiastical system, so that the acknowledged position of the clergy as ethical teachers had no ill effects upon practice. But their interest in speculation was necessarily limited, and in conflict with a free-thinking opponent they were prone to call into exercise the constitutional powers of the Church. Hobbes, but for Charles the Second, ran some risk of being the last man in England to be burnt for heresy. Even the mild observations of Locke brought him considerable hostility. For a considerable time before and after the opening of the eighteenth century it was wiser to publish unorthodox opinions anonymously. Hutcheson, a professor of Glasgow University, and a follower of Shaftesbury, was actually prosecuted so late as 1738 before the Glasgow presbytery because he had taught, ‘first, that the standard of moral goodness was the promotion of happiness to others; and,

second, that we could have a knowledge of good and evil without and prior to a knowledge of God'.

All this was of no service to speculation. It is responsible for a strange confusion of issues and points of view. The arguments of the Deists for a natural knowledge of God, furiously contested at first, slowly filter into orthodox treatises. As the eighteenth century progresses, the divine has no qualms about introducing utilitarian ethics as a second line of defence for the orthodox position ; a turn which would have surprised Hobbes not a little. But this attempt at a natural theology had already been made by the bolder of the early scholastics. The times were ripe for something a little more original ; yet it was not until Kant, living in different conditions which perhaps enabled him to see better the merits of both sides, offered a theory of ethics which preserved at once spiritual values and liberty of judgement, that either the merits or defects of Hobbism were properly appreciated.

For reasons also political, the course taken by ethical speculation on the Continent is quite different. Except for Spinoza, a thinker whose very merits stood in the way of his founding a school, there is no attempt at systematic theorizing ; not from want of talent, but because of the extreme bitterness of the religious struggle. Thus in France in 1685 it breaks out afresh with the revocation of the tolerance extended to Protestants, a bare hundred years after the massacre of St. Bartholomew. Among the flattering titles of which Lewis the Fourteenth was deemed worthy was that of Extirpator of Heretics. The effect of this captious persecution—for there was no telling who might suffer and who go free—upon an educated and highly intelligent people was a remarkable and entertaining development of the arts of irony and innuendo. No skill was spared in the endeavour to suggest conclusions without saying them, and to mock under the appearance of praise. By the invention of this defensive weapon there can be no doubt that the French propagated a good deal

more free-thinking than their monarch could extirpate ; it was to them assuredly that the civilized world of the time would have attributed the cynicism or indifference fashionable in moral views. The result though inevitable was unfortunate, for the merits of abstract thought, and its limitations, are apparent only when it is carried to its extreme amid the air of controversy native to it. As it was, thought was either too much despised or too much respected. In the eighteenth century, as a counterpart of the commoner scepticism, there arose a tendency to assume that a theory which could be successfully argued was capable also of practical application. The declamatory puerilities of Rousseau swept thousands off their feet ; they made practically no impression in England, where thought was worse expressed, but could be more deeply studied. For want of true exercise the Court party, which had never believed in thought, and the 'ideologues', who had never mistrusted it, were alike submerged by forces of which they had made no calculation.

To the most Christian King or his advisers Catholic writers were equally suspect. The official theodicies of Bossuet could do no one any harm, but those who attempted, ever so carefully, to harmonize the theological ideas resurrected by Protestantism with the Roman tradition were suitably repressed. It is curious to reflect that Fénelon, of the type of which France produces so many, simple, scrupulous, and devout, able to bring without any secret reservation all the force of an exceptional mind to the contemplation of God and destiny, should have been 'exiled' to Cambray, while the Jesuits prescribed for the king's conscience. The work of him and his kind can hardly be noticed in so small a book, and the circumstances in which they lived and wrote have deprived it of any permanent place in the genealogy of speculative ethics ; and yet the sensitive conscience of Fénelon combined with his respect for order bring him nearer to the ideal of the practical philosopher than many thinkers more rigorous or more conventional.

Of conditions in the rest of Europe it is impossible to speak at any length. The Dutchman Grotius and the German Pufendorf show in the sphere of international law how ideas of the common interests and natural sociability of man were displacing the old tradition of theocracy and divine dispensation ; but their influence on ethics was not very great. In Germany, the compulsory optimism of Leibniz—for his philosophic views required him to hold that this was ‘the best of all possible worlds’—did create a doctrine of progressive perfectibility which was to some small extent independent of theology ; but its dullness and pedantry confined its influence to the universities.

### I3

#### *Spinoza, 1632-77*

THE *Ethics* of Spinoza was published after his death ; during his life he made, and lost, his reputation by works of less importance. Though the work of Descartes is his starting-point, he belonged to no school, and founded none : yet of all Cartesians he alone may be said to possess a still living influence. No doubt the reason of this is that he exercises the great thinker’s birthright of approaching his subject with such a freshness, an absence of contemporary bias, that it is futile to see him as a fragment of a theoretical genealogy. Even his great contemporaries, Pascal with his new reasons for an old faith, Gassendi with a revived and aristocratic Epicureanism, Bayle, one of the first that have honourably sought to overwhelm intolerance with scholarship, all are deeply tinged with the scepticism which Montaigne and the Inquisition had between them made a literary fashion. But Spinoza is no sceptic, because it did not occur to him to accept their angle of view.

For him the relations between God and man were not a matter to be understood through any traditions that had grown up giving a conventional interpretation of those terms. Except as a part



## SPINOZA

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of God, man was nothing ; and God was nothing if he were not the most complete and ultimate reality, with all which that conception implies. Thus from a statement of the nature of God all the rest would follow.

It was Spinoza's statement which provoked the execration, mainly ironical, in which his name came to be held. A completely impersonalized God, a man whose good and bad contain 'nothing positive', who 'endeavours as far as possible not to be touched with pity', to whom 'repentance is not a virtue', these are undeniably strange ideas, to defend which one would have to read more deeply than the average sermon-maker was probably prepared to do. In truth, such issues are quite secondary. The life embodied by Spinoza both in his theory and his practice comes as near as we may hope to an ideal ; what appears to be lacking is usually found there under another name. 'All excellent things are as difficult as they are rare,' he writes on the last page, and throughout we detect a placid indifference to petty misunderstanding.

Like all thinkers who have insisted that reason and reason alone matters, Spinoza finds it difficult to account for error. Philosophically his system breaks down on this point. Only so far as the individual is a part of God, and knows himself as such, is he real ; his life's purpose is to acquire an 'adequate idea' of himself, to identify his own activity with that of the all-pervading essence, and to discard those emotions in the grip of which, however active he may have fancied himself to be, he was nothing but the plaything of unreal and illusory forces. Only so far as each individual, each body, draws its being from the primal source, does it have reality ; but the casual and fortuitous interplay of body upon body produces motions, and with them—on Spinoza's theory—emotions which are both deceptive and irrelevant. The question naturally arises why these are irrelevant ; they are, one would think, the necessary consequence of the simultaneous

existence of bodies in one space, and to assert that they are unreal seems arbitrary.

It is impossible to argue the matter here. Spinoza insists that the body of God is one and indivisible, and that any appearance of separation of bodies or of consequences arising therefrom is mere illusion ; but why that illusion should be the first and natural state of man is a matter to which he hardly gives sufficient consideration.

His method does not so much solve the stock ethical problems as outflank them. What inducement can be offered men to be virtuous ? ‘What inducement’, he replies, ‘can they possibly require ? Can you persuade the real to be anything but itself ? Blessedness is no reward for virtue, but is virtue itself ; there can be no higher virtue nor greater blessedness than to be real.’ Is man free to will the good ? ‘The question is absurd. The good cannot be otherwise than good ; freedom for it could only be freedom not to be good, a patent contradiction. To be perfect man must have lost the notion of evil, and therewith the notion of good, and therewith again the notion of freedom.’

The wise man is conscious of God, himself, and things as existing under a certain immutable necessity. From his intellectual outlook certain practical consequences follow, and these are the ethics of daily life ; but their value abides, not in themselves, but because they proceed from that love of wisdom which is one and the same as the love of God. The key to ordinary virtue is found in Spinoza’s formula that ‘an emotion which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it’ ; a formula which has in a sense been rediscovered as the basis of psychanalytic therapeutics. There is no need to develop it here. No more in Spinoza than in any one else can we find the infallible guide.

The question of agreement or disagreement, or even that of truth or error, counts for very little in an estimate of this great

man. One can owe him nothing, and still be in his debt. Aided by no charm of style beyond a certain austere directness, he none the less contrives to express in his work something of those qualities which he saw in the reality he sought to discover; work without heat, ideals without passion, hope without fear. Philosophy was not for him a matter of comfortable words, and no authority, however venerable, or deception, however pious, could have commanded his silence. 'The greatness of man is never better shown than by the manner in which he accepts his insignificance; by the fact that he neither ignored this nor yielded to it Spinoza is to be numbered of those few—yet not too few—because of whom man has reason to be proud.'

## 14

*The Eighteenth Century in England*

IF the ethical derivation of Hobbes can be traced to Lucretius and Epicureanism, one reaction against him called in the aid of a more venerable name. The school of Cambridge Platonists, whose title sufficiently indicates their character, sought to maintain the pre-eminence of reason against the shifting standards of sense-experience. But these writers with their mixture of mysticism and mathematical demonstration on the whole incurred the general prejudice against the scholasticism which was slowly dying in the seclusion of the universities. The attempt to enlist Plato on the theological side was not altogether judicious. In his deification of reason Plato is not the father of a particular school but of all subsequent thinking. Moreover, the life of reason which he outlined had very little in common with the good life as laid down by the moral theology he was called in to support. Not a word about charity will be found in Plato; his justice is no more than a sort of state insurance, every whit as arbitrary as Hobbes's; in such matters as chastity he is not merely lax, he

is indifferent. His was a dangerous spirit to summon in defence of a system whose best security lay in the abeyance of criticism. And so it proved. The arguments of Henry More and Cudworth for the supremacy of reason, sincere and imposing as they still are, stimulated a confidence in reason, one of the first consequences of which was to ignore their apologetics and pass to wider fields.

Another type of reaction occurs in the school of 'moral sense', or 'moral taste'. Shaftesbury, its first exponent, has the merit of opposing Hobbes for theoretical and not theological reasons. His views are introspective. For him, the proper object of moral contemplation was the disposition of the individual, not the quality of actions. Our judgements of right and wrong arose from a certain natural temper of our parts and faculties; were, one might say, their psychological accompaniment. They were right when the temper was correct. The same kind of judicious harmony is intended by nature to govern the relations of the individual to society. Just and benevolent relations of man with man are not, as Hobbes had argued, imposed by an artificial compact restricting original selfishness; they are natural, and it is the function of moral taste to recognize this nature.

It is clear that this doctrine is not essentially different from that of Aristotle. It is not so confident; the bane of utilitarianism is upon Shaftesbury. Where Aristotle would have summarily decided that certain ends were not in accord with the true nature of man, Shaftesbury weakly attempts to prove that they do not produce the pleasure which is expected of them. But the difference is a venial concession to an age suspicious of authority. We have here an effective resurrection of the Greek ideas of harmony and proportion as indispensable elements in the conduct of daily life.

But the theory was not a complete answer to the moral problem as envisaged, not in Greece, but in Europe after 1700 years of Christianity. Its weakness is more apparent in the work of his

follower Hutcheson, because the latter attempted more with it. It is essentially a relative theory of good ; relative, not less than Hobbesism, to human interests and capacities, though not in the same way. But Christianity had accustomed Europe to a belief in a goodness which was essentially absolute ; a goodness above and, to some degree, indifferent to man. Was this belief to be surrendered ? Not, at any rate, in England. The positive opinions of the Rev. Dr. Balguy are no longer of much concern to students of ethics, but his criticisms of Hutcheson are sound and just. Is virtue then no more than an instinct ? Does man then become good in proportion to the strength of his passions, and not in proportion to his control over them ? Is a man good only as the ‘ brutes ’ can be good, by the possession of kindly instincts and affections ? Balguy is unable to do justice to the sound prejudice which makes him raise these objections, but his position is at least stronger than those of his fellow divines who in one way and another flirted with relativism.

Shaftesbury accused Locke of being a Hobbesian, and the accusation is largely true. Yet there is an important contrast. Locke’s cautious empiricism is very unlike Hobbes’s assertiveness ; and it is his caution which makes him so much more typical of the new spirit. To Voltaire, searching for a weapon against bigotry, Locke symbolized a new order of things. His tentativeness, his willingness to combine different principles, and his toleration seemed to mark him out as the highest expression, Newton excepted, of that speculative activity which had made England famous over Europe. Such qualities are unfortunately not enduring. Locke’s empiricism is cautious but it is also inconsistent. It would not be easy now to accord him that supremacy he once enjoyed. Things which are merits in a man are not necessarily merits in the book he leaves behind.

In ethics Locke bases his discourse in the main upon the principle that good and evil are to be measured by their effect upon human

happiness ; but he is not unwilling to presume that where the practical issues of this theory are obscure divine authority makes them plain. In like manner he could not regard the state, with Hobbes, as merely the secondary product of individual self-seeking. With Pufendorf he invokes a natural sociability in man as the real foundation of nations.

Locke's indifference to decided views is a characteristic of the more capable thinkers of the century, and is really significant of the transfer of interest in England from ethics to psychology and economics. The interest is no longer in the question whether Hobbes's theory of society is moral or immoral, but whether society does in fact arise out of or is held together by selfishness artificially limited. Both Hume and Adam Smith begin to regard it as an organic structure. Smith remarks on the manner in which the natural tendency of man to do the best for himself economically tends also to the advantage of the whole. Hume sees that a willing and not a forced consent is the basis of any society, however apparently despotic. Both maintain that sympathy is as ultimate a principle of action as selfishness, and that utility hangs as much on the one as the other ; that is, it is not necessary, because one is utilitarian, to show that a generous feeling is excited by some obscure prospect of personal advantage. It is as natural to express generosity as greed, and the complexity of the social structure is based as much on the one as on the other.

At a period when the normal starting-point of speculation was that man's state was sinful, that the natural part of him was the corrupt part, the conclusion implied in the above view, that much if not most of his goodness was quite natural, was disconcerting. As to the effect of their opinions in the sphere of morals Hume and Smith were really indifferent. Both did some lip-service to the notion of moral goodness. Hume suggested that by a psychological law of association certain types of conduct might come to be held in veneration without any regard to their

utility ; but whether there was in fact any universal code of moral conduct, or whether their theories could explain the essence of moral obligation, neither of them seriously considers.

It was beginning to be apparent that the real moral problem was that of obligation. In the face of naturalist derivations of conduct it was becoming almost impossible to contend that any action was imposed by morality and would not have existed but for morality ; but it was equally impossible for those who had experienced it to assert that moral obligation was due to an impulse of personal or social advantage. The theories which take this fact into account are those of Bishop Butler, Price, Reid, and Stewart, and their outlook came to be known as the intuitionist. Butler, whose views enjoyed at one time in Oxford an estimation similar to that given at Cambridge to the views of Paley, by no means makes the best of his case. He attributes the sense of obligation to the working of conscience, to which he allots supreme authority. Had he investigated the theoretical conditions of this supremacy he might have anticipated Kant. But conscience turns out to be no more than an inward voice established by God for the due fulfilment of his laws. Butler could not refrain from adding that the pursuit of virtue was intended to and did end in happiness. Such a combination of reasons is weaker than any of them taken singly. If virtue is happiness, there is little merit in pursuing it ; if God established both the internal and external law, then man is morally responsible neither when he obeys nor when he disobeys. Wrongdoing becomes either an error of taste, with Shaftesbury, or a constitutional defect ; and the authority of conscience, verbally asserted, is implicitly denied.

The other writers of this school may be said to have maintained the reality of the moral consciousness rather than to have demonstrated it. The defence involved an attack upon the metaphysical assumptions of the empirical point of view. Was it, after all, a fact that the objects of thought were derived solely from sense-

experience? Morality seemed to be a clear case to the contrary, for its essential notions, 'right' and 'obligation', implied a universality, a rightness for *all*, an obligation for *all*, which no particular experience could give.

This analysis, right though it was, was not carried far enough. Its chief interest lay, as Kant was to show, in the realm of theory, not of practice. The British moralist sought rather for practical consequences. Yet what consequences could follow? Scarcely anything but the assertion that right conduct was still right, though other interests conflicted. To the beneficial results of right action no appeal could be made, for this would subordinate rightness to utility. There was no alternative but to rely on the *ipse dixit* of the intuition. The intuition was conclusive, but could offer no proof but the fact of its own existence. An impasse seemed to be reached. The utilitarian could construct a code of conduct which, as it was based on interest, could not be moral. The intuitionist held fast to morality, but was precluded from saying what it was.

Of the writers whose main intention was to defend orthodoxy little need be said. The method pursued by Warburton of taking such arguments as suited him, whatever their source or implication, led to absurd confusion. The arguments would have been better without the orthodoxy, or the orthodoxy without the arguments. The extreme was reached when Paley, on the pretext that, as God wills the happiness of his creatures, they can arrive at his will by considering what makes them happy, constructed a system which differs only in unessentials from that of the infidel Bentham.

It is with the name of Bentham that utilitarianism is commonly associated; and the fact is significant of the decline of interest in pure speculation. For at least two generations the title came to imply, not philosophy, but reform. For this philosophy itself was largely responsible. The intensified criticism of man and his institutions had done its work, and the close of the eighteenth

century saw a remarkable fluidity of opinion on all matters. On all sides there were indications of a growing desire to remove the mediaeval presumptions embodied in the social fabric, whether in religion, politics, commerce, penal or constitutional law. As a practical issue the reform of law came, of course, first ; and it is with this cause that Bentham is identified.

In such a sphere the utilitarian formula really justifies itself. The criterion, that the excellence of an act or a condition was the amount of happiness it produced, was one which could be applied to institutions with a tolerable measure of success. It was also, strangely enough, a novel and searching test of mediaevalism. The mediaeval conception of society as a caste-system based upon divine authority and embodied in feudalism still laid a dead hand not only upon France but upon England. That law should be simple and merciful, that feudal privileges should not survive when feudal duties were forgotten, actually came as startling ideas to a nation habituated to the complexities and cruelties of an antiquated law. In England sound common sense had tempered its rigours, but a generation which saw American independence an accomplished fact began to demand something more.

The reforming movement was not confined to classes. It was widely spread, and manifold in form. Bodies like the Quakers have always been honourably associated with the alleviation of human ills. They are inspired by their religion ; here was a human motive with a wider appeal. For from the abstract notion, that the function of society is to minister to individual happiness, it is but a short step to the individual's claiming happiness as a right. It would be very mistaken to regard this as purely selfish. Whatever the shortcomings of utilitarianism, crudely and mechanically selfish though it is in certain respects, the exponents both of its theory and practice were humane and sensitive men. In politics, in any case, its spiritual barrenness is less apparent ; there, simplicity of issue and a wide measure of agreement are imperative.

In the utilitarian formula, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, both are to be found. In fact, in the general organization of democracies no other standard has since been accepted.

But there can be no question that for a time speculative interest disappeared, and the real ethical problems were ignored. We enter on a curious period in which no one philosophizes without an ill word for philosophy, in which common sense is the accepted standard. By the time that Bentham has astonished himself with the discovery of the touchstone of ‘utility’, and given a belated christening to the whole movement, the opposition between utilitarians and intuitionists, though vigorous, is confused and superficial. The literary tendency of the closing years of the eighteenth century was psychological and personal. That there is a real curiosity and interest for the varieties of human motive and character is apparent from the vogue of the novel and the changed poetic outlook. A pause in speculation was not, after all, unnatural. The eighteenth century had accomplished a great deal; time was necessary to experiment with the new ideas. This was the beginning of a movement which has altered the whole structure of society, and is a movement by no means yet complete. For force and extent it can only be compared with the movement which established mediaevalism.

It has raised and is raising its own problems, as to the nature and solubility of which it is impossible to speak except controversially. One matter only has it left perfectly clear—that no amount of social change has any material effect upon ethical questions. Indeed, while France and England were filled with chatter of social reform, the voice of a contemporary, speaking uncouth and incorrigible German, was about to make this plain. But it took some time to translate him.

*Voltaire and Rousseau, c. 1690–1780*

THE ethical history of France in the eighteenth century is to a large extent that of the importation and assimilation of English philosophy, or the sympathetic study of English institutions. Where the movement is not mainly imitative it is covertly political, to its great detriment in either case. Thus if one has read Locke it adds nothing to read Helvetius, in the sphere of theory; and Montesquieu does injustice to his natural bent so far as he attempts to make his comparative study of legal institutions a tract for the times. It can, however, with some truth be urged that the forces which suppressed speculative independence were just those which necessarily coloured everything with politics. The *De l'esprit* was burnt by the Parliament of Paris, and the *Spirit of Laws*<sup>1</sup> was put upon the Index; such facts are to contemporaries of considerably greater importance than the books themselves.

But there are two writers who, though they lack speculative completeness—the one, because he belittled speculation, the other, because he was incapable of it—cannot be passed over. Voltaire was not the source of Continental liberalism, but nothing did so much to spread it as his amazing pen. And if we are to assign the cause of its melancholy eclipse, surely it is in no small degree to be found in the sentimental but deadly illusions of Rousseau? No one than he could have more mellifluously repented the issue, had he lived; but perhaps the worst side of Rousseau was his apparent belief that a good repentance could condone anything.

It is common to regard Voltaire as the very type of good sense, but his own career is not remarkable for it. An adventurer of the best sort, it was only by bitter experience that he learnt the limits of even the greatest talents engaged in a single-handed

<sup>1</sup> Helvetius's *De l'esprit*, 1758; Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws*, 1748.



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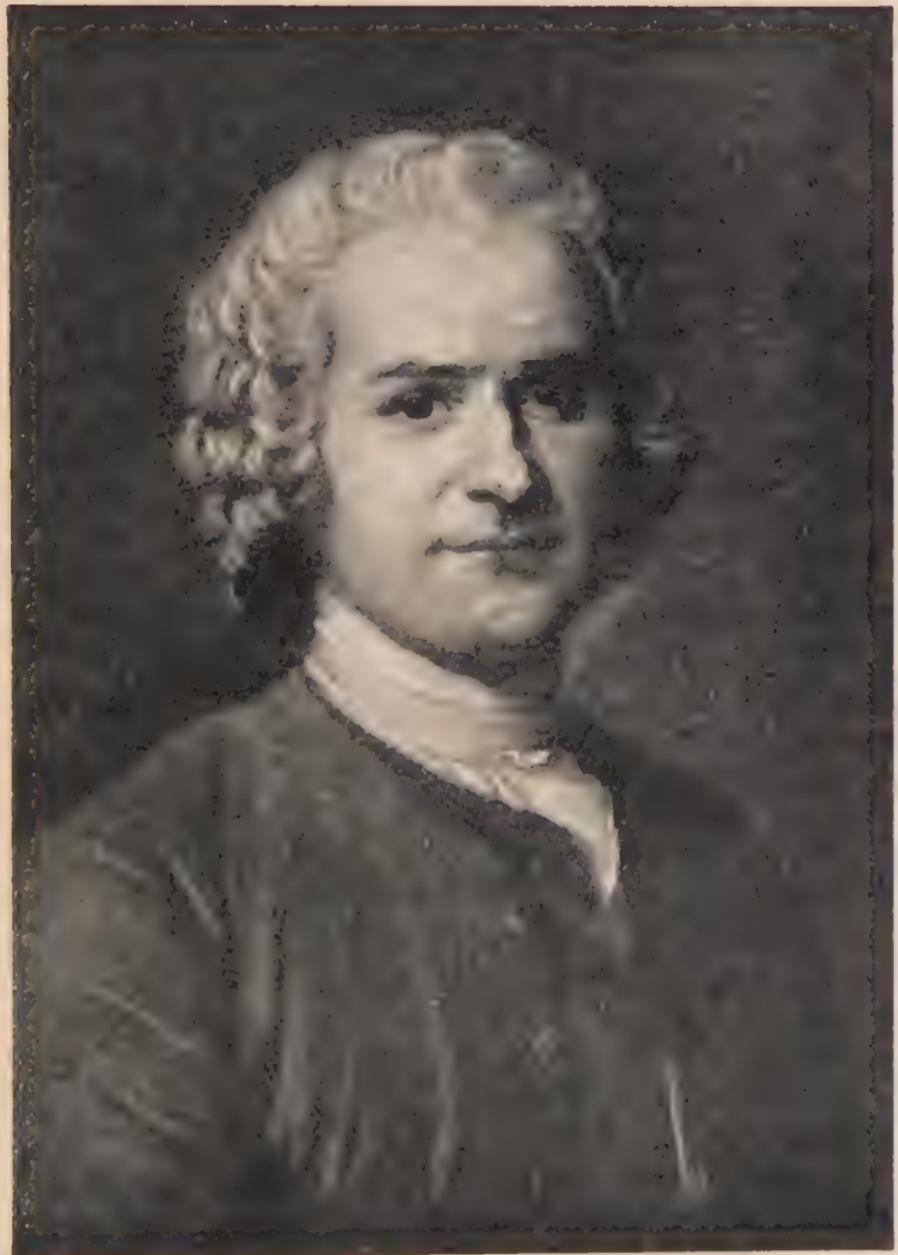
struggle. He found that it was dangerous as well as amusing to be witty, and it would seem to have taken him years to discover that intellectual flirtations with liberal-minded monarchs were not to be interpreted as first steps in reform. What excites admiration is the courage with which he faced his self-created embroilments ; but it is not until he has retired to an estate on the Swiss border and become a ‘ king for himself ’, that he applies his genius with wisdom. Meanwhile his journalism, still fresh and pungent, had made a ferment all over Europe. His selfless and untiring philanthropy at Ferney came to show that it was not all mere words.

Not in ideas, but in the humanizing of ideas, must his influence be reckoned. His political remedies were neither profound nor practical. The revolution required, he once wrote, was in the minds of those who are set in authority, and perhaps he was thinking of some miraculous conversion of Lewis the Well-beloved. The revolution which France in fact required was something simpler and more immediate ; the balancing of budgets, it may be, or a stronger minded Turgot. Voltaire is not free of this coquetting with might-have-beens which was the bane of French thought, and he could not see that systematic philosophizing, which he regarded as the same thing, but worse, was the only real remedy. It is the tendency of the journalist to deal with thoughts rather than with thinking, and to argue that if the one is bad the other is worthless. There was much in current philosophy to justify Voltaire’s comment that it was ‘ the art of saying nothing in thirty-two volumes quarto ’; at the same time the gibe contains a serious confusion between the humility which sets a man thinking and the vanity which persuades him to publish. The bad held the field because there was no better to turn it out ; and the remedy was not to stop thinking but to think again.

His fault was, perhaps, to ask less of man than man is capable of giving. He would have sought no more than a benevolent

despot and the effacement of superstition ; yet it is doubtful if he would have been happy under Napoleon. A man who found such keen joy in living could be excused for not seeing very far ; if he supposed that we use our minds to solve our present discontents, and that except for this purpose it were better not to use them, his temperament must defend him ; and it is true that even in the best of all possible worlds the garden must be dug. There is much of this wilful blindness in Voltaire. Yet it is dangerous to suppose so remarkable a man to be capable of one view only, and the powerful impression exercised upon him by the Quakers suggests another conclusion. In the practice of this simple society did he not recognize another end for which man might live ? Not the happy adjustment of wants to powers, a poor harmony of interior and exterior dispositions, but an end more imperious—the need of a being, neither quite slave nor wholly master, to create himself at the cost of himself, and with eyes open to pay the price.

Rousseau in his *Confessions* speaks of his having given lessons in music when he was the merest beginner himself. The same moral might be read upon his excursions into all fields. When we penetrate his aloof and easy rhetoric we find a turbid and distracted soul. This is indeed no more than the reverse process of that by which he describes his writing to have been done. ‘ Insensibly the violent emotion grows still, the chaos is disentangled, everything falls into its place.’ Not, perhaps, into quite the right place ; or not always the same. The limits of a chapter were the limits of Rousseau’s consistency, a fact which makes general criticism of him a little difficult. One example must serve. Most will remember the striking sentence with which the *Contrat Social* opens : ‘ Man was born free, and everywhere is he in chains.’ Here there is no mistaking his opinion of social constraints as they existed. Yet when he elaborates his own theory of the bonds of society, and considers the case of one who should refuse to obey



ROUSSEAU

From the pastel by LA TOUR in the Museum at Geneva

the 'general will', the coercion of such a man 'signifies nothing but that he can be forced to be free'. Man, it seems, is twice lucky, for he is not only born free, but forced to be free also.

The suggestion that in one case Rousseau is considering the historical, in the other the ideal, does not solve the inconsistency. Rousseau does not himself draw the distinction, but appears to think that his theory applies in both cases. The truth is that he was more concerned with the sound than the sense. His most permanent conviction was that the 'state of nature' was man's true happiness, and society no more than a concession to evil necessity. This, however, did not prevent him dreaming of an ideal society, and the sentimental enthusiasm with which he invariably invested the immediate object of his thoughts drove him insensibly out of his first position; with the curious result that those who would argue for society and those who would argue against can alike borrow their weapons from Rousseau's glittering armoury.

The basis which he lays down for society is essentially borrowed from Hobbes, though in an application which Hobbes did not choose to make. The compact which for Hobbes secured an ordered community was one by which the individuals agreed to vest the charges of government in a 'person', who might be one or many. Where the person was many, the government was a democracy; but even so it was a minority of the whole. No reason but historical prejudice can be assigned for this quite artificial limitation. It is to Rousseau's credit that he conceived the democratic compact in its essential form, namely a compact by which *all* surrendered their rights to *all*, and thus received them again intact. Such a conception, though pictorial, admirably expresses the two-fold capacity of a member of society, as being at once trustor and trustee of the community as a whole. But it is a condition which could be realized in a great variety of historical

forms ; it does not require as a starting-point Rousseau's pedantic postulates of a clean sheet and a free people, of a new Lycurgus furnished with snippets of classical Greece and republican Rome.

It is not often that the day-dreams of a self-tortured recluse come to be taken seriously, but it so fell out that the government of France came into the hands of men who knew or cared for nothing of Rousseau but his books. The world was thus able to judge of what practical service were the ideals of a man who had never found a duty in life but he shirked it, who had never made a friend with whom he did not quarrel. Its eyes were opened to the real value of those fine-drawn distinctions between the 'will in general' and the 'will of all'. Many were the citizens who learnt the benefits of being forced to be free. For all this it is impossible to blame Rousseau. Rousseau never meant the harm that he did, and for this at any rate he was not responsible. But the same fact makes it equally difficult to credit him with the new spirit of humanity he is supposed to have put abroad. On such a matter an Englishman speaks from outside. His love of nature or of man, or that outlook which came to be called, in no bad sense, sentimental, he does not owe to Rousseau, but—so far as he owes it at all—to English sources on which Rousseau himself drew. But in Europe many, Kant among them, proclaimed themselves in his debt.

It will be judicious to leave him such laurels as we can. It will be enough to add that, just as there is no man in whose life accident played so large a part, so after his death accident appears not to have deserted him.

*Kant, 1724-1804*

KANT'S thought begins from a point which should not have been novel, but which, in the course of controversy, had been almost entirely obscured. What is the final object of ethical speculation? The answer of the time would have been: to lay down the conditions of virtue in the individual and in society. That the answer is really inadequate is best seen by supposing that the conclusion reached is negative, that neither man nor society has the capacity for virtue. Would ethics then be but vain discourse? By no means. The Idea of the Good is quite unaffected by human shortcomings: man may be measured by it, but it is not measured by man.

Kant never forgets that the question is primarily one of abstract truth, that the goal here, as in pure philosophy, is to transcend the limitations of humanity and to reveal, however obscurely, the implications of a reality which is absolute. And to the sceptical question, 'How can man transcend his limitations?', he replies that the question is not rightly put: he transcends those limitations by being aware, as he always is aware, of the incompleteness of such truth as he enjoys. He does not need to be convinced of error, but to be shown those conditions which make error inevitable.

Applying this to ethics, he points out that the untutored mind has no need to be convinced of the difference between right and wrong, nor is there any conspicuous disproportion in ability to express that difference in practice; that, in short, there is very little need for a knowledge of general principles in order to live a virtuous life. The philosophers have erred in supposing that their assistance was needed to demonstrate either the worth of goodness or the forms which it should take.

Thus, the existence of good, and the moral obligation to perform

it, he accepts as facts, and wastes no time in doubting of their existence. After all, the matter is entirely one of experience ; it is quite indemonstrable to one who has not experienced it, and to one who has there is no need of demonstration. The importance of this simple fact is against all utilitarian systems, where it is sought to prove either that virtue is a species of pleasure, or that, failing such proof, there is no virtue. The dilemma is, in fact, no more than a librarian's fantasy.

But Kant proceeds to show that while accepting good as a real experience man may at the same time make a twofold mistake ; he may associate it with the wrong facts, build up a wrong code with it, on the one hand, and, on the other, be completely blind to its philosophical implications. And here the criticism applies principally to the authoritarian systems of ethics which, while never doubting of the real existence of good, have drawn from it the most arbitrary and unjustifiable conclusions.

The tracing of the philosophical implications is the most valuable and most difficult part of Kant's work, and one in which there can be little doubt that he shrank from drawing all the inferences to which he was entitled. It is a matter into which his character and environment enter largely. Austere and impersonal as he secretly flattered himself his writings were, they are not without their subtle revelations. His scrupulous impartiality, and his highly trained sensitiveness to every shade of argument, involve him in inconsistencies which would have been escaped by a less able thinker. This is something which affects his metaphysical speculations more nearly ; in ethics, there is evidence of deep personal feeling. No one, one may guess, was so affected as himself by the discovery of the Moral Law. His emotions were probably on a scale with his intelligence, and a clumsy phrase here and there seem to indicate that the disillusionments of life were deeply felt by him. His demonstration of the immorality of suicide, for example, is so weak that we must suspect its strength to have



K A N T

From the portrait by DÖBLER (Brückmann)

consisted, for him, in his relief at finding any argument at all. The diligent castigation of his formula provided him with rules to meet the contingencies of his simple existence, and he professes to have derived from Rousseau a belief in the worth of human nature in which he was lacking.

And this same formula is the weakest part of his doctrine. He considers that one can judge of the capacity of any given impulse to serve as a moral rule by universalizing it, that is, seeing how far it could serve for all persons alike to act upon. If the result were obviously contradictory, it could not be moral. Thus, individual breaches of trust, for example, could never be tolerated; any advantage which they gained was based upon the fact that they *were* an exception to the general agreement to keep faith; a general disregard of the agreement would produce mere confusion.

He illustrates the application of this formula in several ways, none of them convincing. There can be small doubt that Kant is aware of this, though he turns a persistently blind eye. There are two main reasons why the formula will not serve. The first is that the psychological analysis of the situation is incorrect. A man does not, in fact, stop to ask himself whether his impulses are moral; he is perfectly well aware when his intentions are moral and when they are not. His doubts arise when he is faced with the problem of translating his intentions into a correspondingly moral act. The real question is how far the formula would assist him to decide what he must do, not what he must feel.

In the sphere of action the formula offers very little help; one can, for example, imagine a number of situations in which it would be plainly more moral to break faith than to keep it, and in which all logical consistency must go by the board. Also, as Kant himself points out in passages which are not concerned with the defence of his formula, morality is not invalidated by the fact of its not being practicable.

The second objection derives from the manner in which the

formula is arrived at. By a metaphysical argument, which is satisfactory so far as it goes, Kant shows that in a world of perfectly moral beings what is law for one would be law for all. From that position he strives to argue that any law which can be shown to have universal application can on that account be regarded as a moral law ; an argument which ignores two extremely dubious contingencies—first, whether such a law can be found, and second, whether, if found, it would be accepted as moral. A moral law should admit no exceptions ; yet what law is applicable, without reservations of any sort, to all cases whatever ? On the other hand, if we conceive of a law so qualified as to apply rigorously to a given case, and to nothing but the case, then its universal applicability is destroyed. One seems to be involved in the dilemma of having either a law so general that it cannot be applied to any case without some qualification, or a law valid for one unique experience and for no other. In either case the virtue of universality, as providing a test for morality, disappears.

About this difficulty Kant is not very frank ; he is quite frank about the second. He admits regretfully that, even granted the successful construction of a code of morals by means of the universal test, the code would not necessarily provoke any corresponding moral consent. Its mere conformity to rational postulates will not arouse the passionate moral conviction of its supreme worth which, as the supreme good, it ought to inspire. Of course this argument is quite sound as against Kant or other moralists who should suppose that morality consists in making a table of laws and then compelling people to bow down and worship. But Kant himself was bound to no such position. As other parts of his work show, he well understood that the philosopher's problem was not to create moral consciousness but to comprehend it. The contradiction is to be explained in part by the ill-jointed character of his writings, and in part by his diffidence of his own conclusions. The true consequence of his

analysis, that the individual must build his own morality for himself, with nothing to aid him but his own 'good will', was one he was not altogether prepared to face.

His attempt at code-making thus succeeds no better than another's; and the attempt is really a lapse into the utilitarianism which he deplores. His truly epoch-making work lies in his answer to the question what actually is implied in the possession and exercise of moral judgement. Somewhat obscurely, but quite definitely, he insists that such exercise involves a claim on the part of man to a position quite peculiar. As he puts it, the attempt to distinguish between the goodness and the badness of his possible experiences is a hindrance rather than a help in the struggle for existence. As a natural organism man would be better served by the possession of instincts which would automatically choose at the crises of his life such courses as furthered his ends. The distinction which his morality forces upon him between 'good for him' and 'good absolutely' merely leads to bewilderment. On this ground alone we have to recognize in the moral consciousness an activity quite different from those which help to preserve his life.

Kant uses the distinction as a kind of touchstone. All activity which can fall under the suspicion of having been inspired by the pleasure which it produces is, to that extent at least, not moral. It *may* be moral, but this must be established on independent grounds. To all action influenced by pleasure he gives the description *heteronomous*, by this implying that in such cases man cannot prove that he is not mastered by forces stronger than himself. And then Kant passes on to show that all human action must be regarded as heteronomous inasmuch as, whatever our secret beliefs, it is always possible to argue that it is a part of that system of natural forces which we know as the universe. In all action material forces perhaps co-operate, and it would be impossible to say where their influence begins and ends.

Moral action, therefore, whatever else it is, must be autonomous, or free, in the sense that it alone and nothing stronger than or outside itself has inspired its activity. But Kant is well aware that he is here left with a merely negative conception, seeing that it is impossible to prove that any act is not externally influenced. He is thus left with the alternatives of saying either that there is no moral action, or that the same action is at once unfree, and at the same time from another aspect, and in a manner quite unintelligible, free. It is the second of these that he tries to make his considered opinion, and he calls in his formal criterion to assist him. We can be confident that our action is moral when it could be prescribed universally for all persons ; we have no other means of knowing, for in all respects otherwise it conforms to the heteronomous type.

There is no need to elaborate the reasons why this argument fails to convince. The self-confessed unintelligibility is quite enough to condemn it. It is not for such ends that we philosophize. Kant to some extent draws, and at other times suggests, consequences much more stimulating. If one starts from the question what powers the moral consciousness claims rather than what it accomplishes, the issue is more clearly seen. The claim is to give a conclusive verdict as to what is right or good. No matter that this claim is obviously impossible to realize ; unless the moral judgement is a mere delusion it must regard itself as a final tribunal from which there is no appeal. This is the essence of Kant's argument in regard to the 'categorical imperative'. Clearly, therefore, the person, or, let us say, entity, exercising the judgement, whether he knows or not arrogates for himself a position which as a creature of the natural world, dependent on it alike for his wishes and the means of satisfying them, he would not think of asserting ; which is as much as to say that his being is not completed in or expressed by those conditions in which he finds himself compelled to live his life. And this is really 'what was

required to be proved'; for the real question is not how far the Idea of the Good can be expressed in earthly forms, but whether man is, to any extent whatever, a part of the Good. The certainty of this Kant may be said to have demonstrated, and thereby superseded those ethical systems which derived their force from a special revelation.

In the development of his arguments Kant is the first to see the question of free will in its right proportions; namely, that it is a merely negative *notion* arising out of the peculiar claims of the moral judgement. For *actions* it is not needed: the two things are, indeed, incompatible. The choice of man is dependent upon the conditions in which he lives and the capacity he has to respond to them. Let these conditions, internal and external, be conceived as morally perfect; the agent is not thereby made moral, for his goodness would have to be referred to the forces which made him. In any case, the conception is an impossible one, since human conditions imply choice, that is, the possibility of a worse course or a better; and a being under the necessity of avoiding the worse is to that extent not morally perfect. The only activity assignable to a perfect being is that which Kant describes as a 'holy' will, which is good throughout, which is free because it is creative, and therefore unlimited, nor restricted to choice. It goes without saying that this will is only defined by denying it all those attributes possessed by ordinary wills. The notion would remain a speculative curiosity were it not that the moral consciousness, which is indubitably a fact, implies just this creative freedom as its only possible basis. Whether such freedom is exercised, or how, are questions which must wait until philosophy comes to a clearer understanding of man and the universe.

*Empiricism and Idealism in the Nineteenth Century*

IF one were required to distinguish the nineteenth century from its predecessors by one quality only, it would probably be right, all examples to the contrary notwithstanding, to select its humanity. Coupled with man's immensely increased power to impress himself on the world of nature there is an introspective tendency, a quickened interest in human nature as such, a growing disposition to question and even to resent all limitations that nature or society may have imposed on him. The liberal movement which had appeared in Europe before the Napoleonic wars—and of which those wars themselves were but an absurd side-issue—reappeared with their close, and the reactionary period which followed, however successful politically, did nothing at all to suppress its more vital manifestations. History as a study of social conditions, the history of law, psychology, the sceptical treatment of political economy, and not least the novel as the predominating literary form—all of these bear the mark of a new philanthropic spirit, in the widest sense of the term, which as the century goes on is only intensified. From this standpoint the thought of Coleridge and Carlyle, of James and John Mill, hardly differs; their methods and their remedies were unlike, but neither they, nor any other thinker whose views influenced the period, had any aim but the enlargement of humanity. Of this outlook the modern is but an amplification; the twentieth century does not coincide with any change of view, and those who have occasion to read the work of early nineteenth-century thinkers will find that opinions have altered very much less than style. In describing the new spirit as 'the gospel of humanity' Comte was exactly right, though his own interpretation of that gospel has had but a passing influence.

For these reasons the area of conflict also is shifted. The

opponents of empiricism no longer ask for any aid from theology ; indeed, by a kind of tacit consent the religious movements—of which there were many—seem neither to desire nor to be expected to enter the field of pure speculation, and ‘intuitionists’ and ‘utilitarians’ argue their case with no help from revelation. These titles also cease really to apply. J. S. Mill is a utilitarian, claims even to have popularized the name ; but in his efforts to adapt the creed he completely destroys the rigid, if narrow, consistency with which Bentham used the principle. Bentham’s first aim, it must be remembered, was to reform the law ; his interest was almost exclusively directed on the machinery, legal, political, and financial, which society constructs for its own advantage. Of the powers and aspirations of the individual he had scarcely any understanding. Mill, with wider sympathies, desired the goodness of man and society for its own sake, but, in applying the ‘greatest-happiness’ formula to this end, discovered inevitably that it would not work. He thereupon qualified it, but, after his manner, neither acknowledged nor perhaps knew how far he had departed from the principle.

It will be well here to show the ultimate impotence of utility even as a standard of political relations, let alone questions of morals. So far as it can be assumed that human society has any fixed and unalterable end, it is not philosophy but mere commonplace to say that all means taken must be such as to achieve that end. The principle of utility is here innocuous but vague. But if there is no agreement about ends there can be none about means ; and the fallacy of all utilitarians has been to assume that such agreement exists. Seventy-five years ago it was just possible to argue that the pleasures of the average European or the aims of the average state were about the same ; but with to-day’s knowledge of communities of all types, extending over thousands of years, it would be folly to suppose any agreement.

This much can be said for utilitarianism, that it is a valuable

and indispensable standard by which to criticize a given community at a given date of time, in order to see how far the ideals which it professes are realized. It can reveal inconsistencies and castigate prejudices, improve organization. In transitional stages, when new ideals are taking the place of old, it is of special assistance; but it does not make the ideals. How these should come to be was a question which the intuitionists, with all their faults, never forgot.

But here also the title no longer applies. The eighteenth-century representatives of this school postulated a faculty which appraised the ethical value of conduct; but such a faculty, apart from the dubious question whether it in fact exists, does not, as has already been shown, serve the end for which it was created. Seeing that the excellence of its functioning must in the last resort, as with the other so-called faculties, depend upon natural endowment, its possessor can gain no more moral credit from it than from good eyesight. And this rather feeble though well-intentioned line of speculation was brought to an end by the ferment arising in Germany out of the Kantian philosophy. True, those who first came under its influence in England can do little justice to its theory. Coleridge, for example, when he is not a gospeller is a mere plagiarist. Yet what that era called the German Philosophy undoubtedly reinforced the enthusiasm of those temperamentally inclined to intuitionism, and of those who, like Carlyle, were shocked and irritated by a certain jejune pedantry in the utilitarian school. And though Mill scored quite easily over the traditional views, by the time his own ethical treatise was published there had arisen in England a school incomparably better trained than himself, and trained very largely upon those German thinkers whom he had found too 'tedious' to read.

It is unnecessary in this book to repeat the criticisms which this school successfully urged against Mill's views. By assuming

that pleasure was the sole end at which man could aim Mill was compelled to argue, first, that man never sacrificed his own pleasure to the communal well-being, secondly, that he never sacrificed the communal well-being to his own pleasure, and finally, that by a miraculous law of association he ceased to love pleasure and followed virtue for its own sake. It is only fair to him to remember that he was not trained as a thinker but as an apologist and disputer, that his philosophical work is the product of his spare time, and that he lacked opponents of his own standing. Had he come under other influences in his youth, or not regarded the propagation of his views as a mission which he owed to Bentham and his father, his reputation might be different to-day. In him a thwarted sensitiveness led to a thwarted intelligence. He was fair to all opinions but his own. His significance is best seen, not in his philosophy, but in the fact that thousands of his contemporaries believed him, as he believed himself to be, the unwearied champion of free and liberal thinking.

Mill lived to see the study of philosophy in England take root in the universities from which he had expected no more good. The effects of this transplantation were various. The gain both in detachment and technical competence was great. Philosophers were now found who had read the works of other philosophers ; essential and inessential were rapidly disentangled ; the courageous, if slightly irritating, spectacle of a Spencer developing his propaganda in solitude was doomed to disappear. But the change seems to have led to a decrease of public interest, though for this there may be other causes ; even so, it is not perhaps unjust to detect a certain obscurity of style and presentation greater than is necessitated by the difficulty of the subject, together with a certain wilfulness, or pride in theory, which is the natural counterpart of the over-accommodating conscience of the empiricists.

The university or professional school was predominantly idealist in character and derived in the main from German

thought of the early years of the century. In ethics the work of Kant is the natural starting-point, but thinkers like T. H. Green have been considerably influenced by Hegel also. Green's views, or modifications of them, are part of the current philosophy of the day, and it is therefore impossible to come to any summary conclusion about them. Nor must it be supposed that criticism of them involves any such divergence of outlook as existed between intuitionist and empiricist. The inevitable modifications of idealism have hardly anything in common with preceding schools.

Under the influence of Hegel Green and his successors offer a definition of moral freedom which was expected to make good deficiencies in that of Kant. Kant, it will be remembered, had insisted that it was impossible to give a positive character to the moral law except by a logical process; that the morality of an impulse could be ascertained only by seeing whether that impulse prescribed an end which was proper for all persons and not one alone. Against Kant it was objected that the idea of a moral law which prescribes nothing except by a juggle of this kind was null because it was ineffective; in other words, that morality implies not only an attitude but actions. With him it was agreed that a moral act must be free; and, more boldly, it was claimed that free acts were possible. Kant himself had shrunk from this conclusion; he did not see how a creature of conditions like man could be free, but by the device given above he could at least assure himself that his acts had one moral quality, namely, that they were universally binding; and were thus at least not dissonant with freedom. The inadequacy of this formula has already been observed, but the amendment here proposed seems to contain much more serious difficulties.

The amendment is based upon the psychological fact that the willing of an act can be separated only in thought from the act willed. The process is not first the will, then the act; there may be a preceding period of deliberation and vague wishing, but the

will, as distinct from the wish, is only rendered apparent through a determinate act ; it is this act realized, out of an infinity of possible acts, which is all we know of the will.

Before the indubitable truth of this analysis can be properly understood it is necessary to add that just because acts are the expression of will, and just because the will of one man is not that of any other, acts cannot be classified with any strictness. The question ‘What would you do in my place?’ is based upon the fallacious assumption that a man can interpret his active life in any terms but his own. Sympathy can do much ; a few general rules are possible ; but the real truth is that a man’s vital present is made by himself (by past acts of will) and cannot be responded to except by him who has made it.

It is upon the ground that all willing appears as an act that the possibility of treating of the *form* of the will apart from its content is denied. To judge of its moral character by estimating its universality is neither possible nor relevant ; the morality must be determined by some quality of the act willed. In fact, it is asserted that all willing is free ; the question whether it is moral is decided, not by its freedom, but by whether the object really satisfies the end for which it was willed. The true object of the will is the realization of the true self in the light of its perfection.

This view is open to serious criticism. Upon the practical side it is neither more nor less adequate than any other standard. No one would deny that it gives expression to a conception of morality under which the particular aspects of conduct can be grouped ; but no one would refuse this in the same degree to the other standards, Hellenic, religious, empirical, which reflection has evolved. One must expect the same unprofitable discussion of special cases, the same conflict of prejudice masked as reason, the same implicit denial to the individual of his right to decide for himself in the one sphere in which his own judgement really interests him. For such an end it is not worth while moralizing,

and it is not in this manner that the strange flower of moral beauty grows.

Theoretically also there are objections. It may seem a small matter to make morality dependent upon reflection or reasoning, and it is of course true that every one reflects upon his moral impulses. Yet it is still more true that, psychologically, reflection tends to destroy the moral quality of the impulse. Crude moral enthusiasm has no doubts, and uses reason only to apply means to ends. But where reason is called in to decide whether an impulse is moral or not, the only result can be to chill first fervours without putting anything definite in their place. The conception of self-realization cannot supply particular rules valid in all circumstances, any more than could Kant's formula. Human error is the necessary complement of human reason, and a theory which makes morality a department of reasoning is always open to the same criticism, whether the standard it offers is self-realization, or utility, or anything else—namely, that the supremacy of the moral consciousness is subordinated to a faculty the conclusions of which are, by their nature, never final.

In attempting to provide an intellectualist interpretation of morality this school does no more than repeat Kant's error. But on the question of freedom it deliberately sets aside the Kantian distinction between moral action as *ex hypothesi* free in contrast with all other action as not free; on the contrary, it regards all action as free, and makes moral action but a special type. The point is, in a sense, but a question of terms; if one chooses to regard the unique activity known as willing as free, no harm is done; but it must be remembered that Kant considered it, for precisely the same reasons, to be determined. Determined because the act willed took place upon terms, conditions which the individual did not make but to which he has to submit. Just for this reason he distinguished between a moral will and a holy will, and introduced his universalizing formula; from the mere appearance

of things a man was unable to decide that his acts were not merely the sport of his conditions.

While it is impossible to assert dogmatically that they are wrong, it may be said that Green's metaphysical arguments in proof of human freedom are not convincing. How time, unending, never complete, could be the condition of a free being, is a problem the solution of which would make a change in philosophy so profound that it could not be overlooked. Green seems to have rested on certain analogies between human consciousness and what we seem forced to regard as attributes of an absolute reality. The weakness of his case is well shown by Henry Sidgwick, both in the practical and theoretical aspects. So far as concerns the former, it can hardly be denied that the vague conception of self-realization is, in comparison with intelligent utilitarianism, a frail support of the ordinary virtues against the ordinary vices. It is a little curious that one of the idealist school should have continued to toy with the belief that it is a philosopher's business to lay down rules of conduct.

It is to be noted that what may be called Hegelian views of the State are very inferior to the utilitarian both in point and in humanity. The failing arises, pardonably enough, from the conviction that society is the natural aid and complement to man in an endeavour to realize the best that is in him. It might have been supposed that the only just interpretation of society, for this purpose, was, with the Stoics, the whole species of man. Conformably, however, to the general Hegelian notion that history is a manifestation, under various and opposing forms, of Spirit—a view supported by an always arbitrary and sometimes ludicrous manipulation of fact—it was assumed that existing states were societies in this sense; and much ingenuity has been expended to prove an ethical relation between the individual and the nation of which he happens to be a member. In the light of the preposterous conclusions drawn from this principle, the utilitarian

view that government is as often a hindrance as it is a help seems almost profound. A more impressionable study of history reveals clearly enough that so far as the moral conscience of a nation has been limited by its physical boundaries it does not deserve the title.

There is a certain freakishness in the fact that the idealist, whose true ethical unit is the individual, should pay such homage to the state, while the utilitarian with his concern for communal well-being should have such suspicion of government. Undoubtedly the utilitarian formula, in its subtler compliance with the incalculable in human development, the strange upspringing of new desires and ambitions, is the safer guide. If it is man's pleasure to go to the bad, go he must; no dubious generalizings about his true End will stop him. The danger of all rationalism is the assumption that the end is known. But, as evolutionary ethics was to show, man is a growth, not an end. He is what he wants to be, and it is much more important that he should want to be something than that he should express his wants within the limits of his knowledge. When the utilitarian asserts that man's pleasure is a guide to his essential nature, as man, in this he speaks truth, though he also is prone to rationalize.

It is perhaps unfortunate that latter-day idealism has to some extent overlooked the consideration from which Kant started; namely, that it is inconceivable that the moral consciousness is in any way concerned with man's physical well-being. With his power to adjust means to ends by rational calculations man is, theoretically at least, fully equipped for the satisfaction of his personal or social needs. But if the idealist tries to set out those forms of living which in his view best correspond to the claims of the moral being, a confusion arises. In the course of a long and complicated argument the theorist tends to forget that his constructions are all tentative, that a moral being must be allowed to express himself in the terms which he himself chooses. On the

other hand, he is very much inclined to measure the morality of men by the extent to which their manner of living conforms with his constructions. In doing this, however, he ceases to be an idealist and becomes a utilitarian of a kind, as he is measuring morality by its consequences.

It is true that Kant himself, with the tedious dogmatism of his later ethical writings, is the first offender against his own principles ; but the error need not have been repeated. To whatever extent man endeavours to conform his acts to his moral ideals—and that is an extent much greater than is commonly recognized—the dominant factor of his life is the need to live. His practical morality depends upon the success with which he provides for that need ; and though it is an abiding truth that, however difficult his mere existence may be, he will pack it as full of morality as he is able, the fact that the struggle is never decided renders it impossible to lay down beforehand in large book and treatise the forms of his morality.

## 18

### *Ethics and Evolution*

THE review of ethics in the light of evolutionary notions, which was pursued with great vigour in the second half of the nineteenth century, had on the whole highly stimulating results, though it tended to perpetuate certain confusions. Most notable of these is the opportunity which it provided for the reinterpretation of the doctrine of ends. It has already been pointed out that the first problem of ethics is to discover how far or in what way the individual is concerned with the idea of the good ; whether his aspirations after perfection, so ceaselessly expressed and in so many ways, are an illusion or a fact on which he can build with some confidence. Again and again that question had been obscured by one relatively unimportant, how far morality could be used on

earth to construct a perfect society ; a question which implies that morality is to be measured by the ends which it serves. And evolution, by suggesting ends of quite a new character, is responsible for a good deal of misdirected and degenerate speculation.

The opinions most current were the most debased. Except for the sake of contrast it is hardly worth while alluding to the kind of views that could be built on such a phrase as the Survival of the Fittest. Which of these terms is to be emphasized ? Is fitness to be measured by the fact of survival, or is survival to be permitted only to those who are fit ? In all arguments deriving from this standpoint there is a tendency to supplement the deficiencies of one alternative by sliding into the other.

The fact is that evolution made conceptions, hitherto open to fairly clear definition, obscure. Life had meant the life of the individual ; survival, the individual's survival. In evolutionary usage they mean for the most part the life and survival of the species. But what is this life that no one lives, this survival which no one of us enjoys ? This abrupt transference of interest from the individual to the species is the hidden cause of the tedious controversy about the relations of man and apes which sprang up upon the publication of the *Origin of Species*. Christian ethics in all its varieties had staked its existence on the primacy of the individual's soul ; this essential element, however, was overlooked in a fatal and unprofitable wrangle about dates and revelation ; as though the credibility of Moses had any bearing on the matter.

Darwin and Spencer are very far from exploring the theoretical possibilities of the new conception. In it are involved two main questions, the first of which is the endeavour to understand the meaning and import of this immense proliferation of life into various forms, to determine how far these are fixed, and how far and why they change. This was Darwin's main preoccupation, and it is a philosophical rather than an ethical problem. His answer, that species develop by an infinite accumulation of

infinitesimal changes, cannot be said to have survived criticism. His refusal to entertain the notion that life is moved by anything which we can describe as purpose—difficult and dangerous though this notion may be—is a mere concession to the fashions of his time ; and his hope of treating evolution as a merely mechanical process has proved quite illusory. The whole subject is brilliantly discussed by H. Bergson in his *L'Évolution créatrice*.

The second question is distinctively ethical. It regards conduct as based on considerations which promote the survival of the species. This implies a kind of return to the Stoic point of view, as may be seen in Spencer's own theories, according to which the object of life is to produce a kind of abundance of itself, and the natural duty of man to become aware of and identify himself with life's purposes, with a view to promoting such a harmony between himself and his surroundings as to make the exercise of virtue at once painless and automatic.

If we discount the queer language in which Spencer chose to elaborate this notion, it will be seen that there is nothing especially new in it. The perfect functioning of a perfect organization is the main idea of Plato's *Republic*. It is also offered by Aristotle as a tentative definition of the cause of pleasure. More generally, it is a conclusion which to a certain extent we cannot avoid when we meditate upon the meaning of perfection ; and the fact that it recalls pre-evolutionary theories itself raises the doubt whether evolution can be explained by it. Indeed it is plain that Spencer has reverted in part to a stationary conception of nature : though man has developed up till now, and has not yet finished his course, Spencer's theory appears to suggest that there is a stage at which development can go no farther, and can do no more than revolve upon itself.

Spencer, as it is plain that his ethics are subordinated to an ulterior purpose, is a utilitarian. It is no matter that the purpose is now the maintenance of the species, and not the satisfaction of

the individual. The differences created by the change are not worth touching upon. In its own fashion his theory falls into the same arid difficulties, which have to be solved by the same subterfuges. Pleasure has to be pleasure even when it does not seem so ; as always, human consciousness of absolute good has to be denied, and the sense of duty reduced to a psychological marvel. Our rude forefathers believed in ghosts, according to Spencer ; and we inherit a sense of duty. We will leave this to those who can believe it.

Whether, in fact, evolution makes use of man, or man of evolution, in any so harmonious and profitable a fashion as Spencer suggests, is a dubious question. The idea of evolution is not to be identified with the idea of growth. It is true that the evolutionary picture, as unfolded by the geologists, presents us with examples of species-growth, possessing those features of youth, maturity, and decline which are familiar to us in the growth of the individual. But there is one momentous difference. We measure all things by their maturity ; to this all the other stages are relative. In the evolutionary process, however, all the stages seem equally unimportant. In contemplating it we suffer the same sense of disorientation as we should if, in looking back over the history of mankind, we should see, not grown persons working out their destiny in bitterness and pain, but an endless vista of children at play, with hobby-horse and doll. Yet the one view is as true as the other.

Growth has a culminating point ; evolution has none. For this reason it is impossible to suppose that a society which has reached the stage, envisaged by Spencer and others, in which there is complete harmony between the members, is for that reason in closer touch with evolutionary design. In this scheme, whether any species continues, or in what form it continues, cannot be shown to be of any importance whatever. If we desire to get a glimpse of the purposes of evolution, we must not begin by

assuming that our own wishes have any weight. Evolution must not be used as a means of introducing the old ideas of progress and perfectibility under a new name.

With a really radical investigation of this notion two names may be associated, those of Nietzsche and Samuel Butler. Both of these, accepting the endlessness of the evolutionary regress, develop its implications after their own fashion. If any stage in the process is as important as any other, clearly the sole point with which man is concerned is that point at which he is living. This alone has freshness and significance. Evolution, though it appears to link up past and future in an unfathomable series, is only to be approached from the present. This, at least, is what is involved in the ethical outlook of Nietzsche; Butler, whose point of view is more biological, looks rather to the permanent which can serve as the basis of all this ordered change.

For Nietzsche the focus is the individual. *He* is the evolution of the moment; it is his being that is quickened by these mysterious and formidable forces. And if this is life, to this he must respond; he must affirm it, 'say yea' to it, with all his power. Indeed, it is only so far as he surrenders himself that he has power. All influences, whether customs, traditions, or systems of thought which might hem and hinder his original activity, are illusory and bad. On this account Nietzsche pours contempt upon the moral code of Europe; it restrains the strong in favour of the weak, and interferes with nature at its most natural.

As Nietzsche passed from sanity to madness his conception of the strong man underwent a change. At first it was that of a man prepared to accept life on its own terms. His strength was not to exclude other qualities. He had not to be without heart or head; he got no more out of living than the others; life spared him no more than the rest. His strength lay in his schooling himself to accept life as it was given him, and, especially, that hardest condition of all, its recurring cycles. All this is little more

than Stoicism, though couched in language the brilliance and beauty of which the Stoic would have suspected. But in the later works, taking, it may be, a hint from nature itself, Nietzsche seems to be bewitched by the thought of cruelty for its own sake, as though the creatures of nature were required to show the same indifference to each other as nature showed for them. Its very strangeness has given this attitude a certain currency, and weakened the reputation which Nietzsche deserves to possess as a serious, if unsystematic, thinker. As time passes it only becomes more clear that he let fresh air into a subject that had grown dangerously stuffy.

Equally wholesome in his own way was Butler. His remorseless, and to a certain pardonable extent malicious, criticism effectually exploded the pretensions of Darwinism so far as it professed to be a completely original idea, or to have explained life in terms of mechanism. What, indeed, struck Butler, as observers since, was not the pliant adaptation of life to its environment, but its immense intractability. If a long enough space of time be taken, the loser in the struggle appears to be invariably the environment. It imposes no terms ; on the contrary, the organism takes of it what it will. In a sense, even, there is no environment, except what the organism chooses to make for itself. It is inert matter, either utilized or ignored. With a superb extravagance, life shows how the environment can be exploited not in one but an infinity of ways ; as though to mock its slavishness.

But for Butler the hero of this epic was not the individual. The individual struggled, slipped, and perished. Where it succeeded, its success was little due to its own merits ; its accumulated capital, the experience acquired in generations, pulled it through. Its function was to acquire a little more, to bring back something, though it were ever so little, to the repository. Here, in the germ or seed of the race, where there was no change but for the better, no consciousness because no uncertainty, was the

true centre of life. This was the immortal, the unconquerable ; immortal because it had never lived, and unconquerable because it had never battled.

With an engaging ingenuity Butler develops the implications of his theory. Since only the germ was permanent, since ‘the hen was only an egg’s way of producing an egg’, it was by its value for the germ that the individual’s conduct must be measured. In consciousness and personality for their own sake there was no value ; nor in pain and endeavour. These were the means by which the seed acquired its potentialities. Its object was to have the greatest possible capacity with the least effort and the minimum of error ; to it nothing was criminal but a mistake. The ideal embodiment of the germ was therefore an individual whose mind and body had profited most by the experience acquired in the past. A man who made friends rather than enemies, one who marched easily to success, one who did not take things so much as had them given him, whom even fortune favoured—such was the perfect man.

This indeed was to take by storm the ancient citadels of morality. It is not particularly relevant to ask how far Butler was serious. He had been given a biological problem, and had attempted to solve it. He was irritated by the perversity of the early evolutionists—we still can be—who insisted on the one hand that here was an absolutely new idea, and yet, on the other, insisted on adapting it to the old morality and its implications of duty, and altruism, of personal and social ends. For Butler, new ideas spelt revolution. Nothing less than the complete re-thinking of a subject could satisfy them. If biology went beyond the individual and the species, then they must be discarded. Their morality did not count. That alone counted on which all else hung ; it could dictate, because it was real. Its uses for man might be very different from what he had supposed ; but it was not for him to complain.

Butler had in fact another morality for life's failures, of whom he counted himself one. Of the god-like beings there were never so many going about as seriously to disturb the balance, and of their nature they were able to look after themselves. For the others, as for Butler, the inferior virtues of patience and fortitude, trust and friendship, were a reasonable compensation ; above all, a stubborn and ironical sense of the mystery of things. The bane of the world was the solution-monger, one who used the prestige of learning to deceive himself and others with superficial questions and shallow answers. Against such a certain pig-headedness was the best protection, for the folly of ignorance was less dangerous than the folly of wisdom. For Butler, as for Socrates, the easiest thing in the world was to be wrong : the most difficult, to know it.

## 19

*Current Developments*

Of current ethical thought it is not possible to do more than consider some general characteristics. A conspicuous feature is the growth of the disinclination, already apparent before, to make codes or assign duties. The freedom of the individual to make his own decisions is recognized as an indispensable necessity ; the curious fear for goodness has practically disappeared.

In proportion as the individual has acquired liberty of action, so has the belief in the state as the moral end declined. It is indeed a significant feature of the time that this conception should disappear from ethics more or less coincidently with its appearance in politics as a leading theme. Its shortcomings as a moral factor have been pungently enumerated ; in particular, the fallacy of assuming that the social or gregarious needs of man lead directly to the state. These needs are shown to be satisfied by smaller groups, which lie both within and without the political organism. Not only are there man's family and professional

interests and clanships ; much more important are the groups based on common ideals or principles, groups which exist only to represent this common bond, and which, unlike states, cease to exist when the bond ceases to unite. Such groups are typified to a certain extent in political parties, but their potential influences lie rather with entirely voluntary societies. Lovers of art, lovers of learning, lovers of animals, lovers of peace, exercise in their corporate capacity but small powers perhaps ; but it is clear that their influence is at least simple, direct, and efficient. If one reflects upon the incalculable influence on English life which a similar voluntary ideal, that of good breeding, has had and still has, it will be apparent that here is a type of force against which the forces of state, always largely composed of sheer momentum, seem strangely unmoral.

The peculiar feature about such groups is the thoroughgoing identity between the individual and the group point of view ; and the closer the identity the less tendency on the part of the individual to refer back from himself to the group. In fact, the more conscious he is of speaking its mind the less conscious he is of that for which he speaks. Simple illustrations will serve. No one talks less of gentlemanliness than the gentleman. But if an occasion should move him to say ‘No gentleman would have done that’, he does not picture himself appearing before the body of gentlemen and obtaining a verdict by a majority. His word is the verdict, and is given as such.

Groups of this kind are a precise and faithful representation of Aristotle’s rule of the mean. They permit an infinite variety of reaction to circumstances, while providing that every reaction shall preserve the character of the whole ; be stamped, as it were, with the hall-mark. In the light of their potent unobtrusiveness, one may well suspect that, so far as a man can distinguish between the state and himself, it is because he and the state lack morality. The distinction is the symbol of the deficiency.

Criticism, however, does not stop short at pointing out that the state is not a moral organism in fact : it is beginning to doubt whether it ought to be. The ancient and honourable identification of ethics and politics is breaking down. Partly in consequence of evolutionist thought, partly, no doubt, because of the failure even of the utilitarians to show that pleasure was a moral quality, philosophy has begun to contemplate human activity from a non-moral standpoint. The assumption that every act, however indifferent, should be capable of being related to a moral basis, is called in question. The indifference appears to signify, not a failure in our powers of discernment, but a real fact.

From this standpoint life and activity are regarded not as a progress to a moral ideal ; not even as a progress at all, but rather as an experiment. Their ceaseless change and eternal variation are not faults or deficiencies, as almost inevitably they tend to be interpreted under the immutable concepts of reason or morality, but an essential character. The history of life, which we have been prone to regard as a process of realizing in the concrete our conceptions of the good or the true, has, it would seem, just the opposite function, that of making us realize how much our conceptions of the good and the true need development.

This view undoubtedly does more justice to certain aspects of life than has hitherto been done. It does not shirk the question, ‘Why is life what it is, and not something else—the true, for example, or the good?’ For it is essentially something ; positive ; determinate. And the answer would seem to be that it is first and foremost an expression in terms of form, or of that which in certain aspects we call beauty. The first impulse of life is not to rationalize, or moralize, but to express ; only through expression do we have something to rationalize or moralize upon. More than this, even reason and morality are themselves nothing except so far as they are expressed.

Thus to the idea of beauty or form for its own sake a new

standing and validity has been given. Instead of being regarded as an inferior derivative of the good or the true, if not a mere illusion, its independence is recognized, and it is used to explain just those aspects of life which had proved so refractory to reduction to the other conceptions. So far as life is changeable, experimental, creative, artistic, it is so because it is striving to express itself in terms of form ; and from this effort spring its diversified concreteness and individuality.

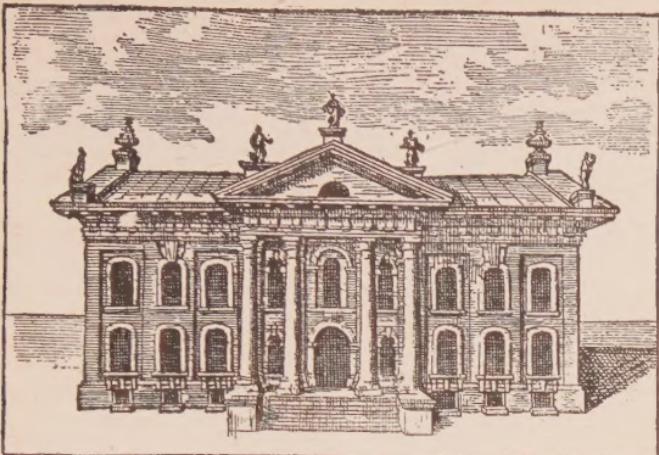
A better understanding of these two notions, concreteness and individuality, is just what is required to complete our ethical outlook. As the history of philosophy shows, the obvious difficulty of finding truth within the world of living experience creates an almost irresistible tendency to postulate it as existing apart, somewhere and somehow independent of the world. We remove the veils of illusion one by one, in the hope of finding truth beneath ; but we find that truth is not beneath. Not to lose it altogether, we say that it enjoys a life of its own. But we are well aware that this separation between a falsehood which is real and living, and a truth which preserves itself at the cost of exile, is far from what we should desire.

Morality is in a similar predicament. If the world is not good as it stands, where then is goodness ? We have the alternative of placing it, with reason, outside the world ; or we can assume that, somehow, it lies in the future, a to-morrow which never comes.

Here, however, is another solution. The true and the good are expressions before they are abstractions. They exist for us as form, concrete and individual, in an immediate present. The truth is not quite true, the goodness not quite good, yet—so near is pessimism to optimism—it is only because they exist as they are that we are able to consider them as they might have been. What they lack is supplied under another heading, for beauty at least exists for its own sake, beauty is not spoiled by existing in an infinity of forms ; and beauty, on this showing, is as real as they.

sort an automatic process, in which our sole concern is to see that the external conditions are favourable; a view involving the strange perversion that politics is the father of ethics. Upon this or the contrary notion, that the growth is absent only because the conditions are bad, much current political theory is implicitly based. Thus it is argued that only good education is needed to make man wise; only a competence to make him virtuous; that by wealth and civilization life can be made easy. And yet the difficulty of life is so obviously a constant factor, consisting as it does solely in the effort which is indispensable to being alive at all. New conditions merely create new difficulties, and though this is no reason for not removing the difficulties we can, it should put a stop to vain hopes of an end to trouble.

If modern ethics inculcate any practical lesson, it is that of not being hypnotized by the future; from the present must all things be measured. The constructions of history and science, the infinite extension of past and future, have to some extent weakened man's belief in himself. He is encouraged to take what he believes to be broad views; he shows a perverted pride in seeing himself as an infinitely small factor in a movement over which he has no control. Yet he is deceiving himself. Importance is not a matter of size: microscopic views are broad views also. After all, the distance recedes from where he stands; he is the centre of the immeasurable spaces. He may gape at the stars, yet without him the frosty concourse does not shine. He goes farthest who goes not at all; who, rather than run races with time, busies himself with that wherein time enters least, and is bold enough to live, as it has been ordained, for a short hour, for a little while. Only by forgetting time does he invest himself and his doings with the salutary magic of eternity.



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